Wives of the Revolution

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Alessandra Strong, Cassandra Kanagawa, Mick Mercury, Sasha Wire, Cecil Kanagawa

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Wives of the Revolution

by hundred_separate_lines

Summary

After taking down the Board of Fresh Starts and distributing the Curemother throughout the galaxy, Juno and the Carte Blanche crew face down a new foe. Together, they join the Nureyevist fight against New Kinshasa and its oppressive Guardian Angel System. Can Juno protect his family in the middle of a revolution, or will they be defeated by the forces of injustice and a bunch of deadly lasers?

Notes

Hello! I hope you enjoy this story that I've been working on for (checks watch) seven entire months!

I want to give a special shout-out and thanks to the incredible Joc (noir-martian on Tumblr and @random_jocelyn on twitter) for providing the incredible art you'll see in this fic! She created a piece for every single chapter, and they're all absolutely wonderful. It was a huge honor to work with her on this project!

I also want to thank looking-for-destroya (bigmcworm on ao3) for beta-ing this fic and for helping me with story development. I absolutely could not have done this without them. They are an incredible writer and an even better friend.

You can find me on tumblr as hundred-separate-lines if you'd like to chat about this fic, Penumbra, or anything, really.

I'm so excited to share this story with the world! Thank you for visiting my own little room on the Penumbra!

In which our story begins

Chapter Summary

> *Stepping foot on Brahma will kill us instantly, and getting anywhere near it will bring New Kinshasa down on our asses faster than you can say 'totalitarianism.'"*
>
> *"That is not especially fast," Jet pointed out. "' Totalitarianism' has eight syllables."*

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for each chapter will be listed in the beginning notes, but there are no warnings for this chapter! (If you would like any to be added, or any tags, you can leave a comment below)

"Top right."

Juno tugged insistently at the handle, but the drawer gave way with only the slightest resistance — old Earth wood, he guessed, and sticking from the heat — and opened to reveal a stack of blank paper, an inkwell, and an old-fashioned fountain pen.

"Nope," he said, glancing up as Nureyev leafed through yet another set of files, these ones extracted from behind their mark's expensive-looking file cabinet. He frowned.

"This is nothing," he said, setting the file down. He glanced up at Juno. "Middle left?"

Juno checked that drawer next, but the files within were about business dealings that, after a cursory glance, were irrelevant to the task at hand. When he glanced back up, Nureyev was picking the lock on their mark's safe.

"Hey," Juno warned. "We're here for a reason."

Nureyev raised an eyebrow but stayed focused on the safe. "Other than the desk, we've searched the whole room. And I think you've got that handled, Juno dearest."

Juno scowled and ignored the heat that rose to his cheeks at the

endearment. “I’m telling you, it’ll be the top left.”

Nureyev rolled his eyes. “Then stop stalling and check the drawer, love.”

He did. The drawer held nothing but a bag of salmon dusty crunchies. Juno frowned and began to examine the seam between the drawer and its bottom.

He hummed as Peter joined him next to the desk, crouching beside him and kissing him on the cheek. “Hermes will be home soon. We should go.”

“Hang on,” Juno said, feeling around the bottom of the drawer. His fingers brushed the latch in the back corner, so small as to be nearly unnoticeable. He grinned. “Hah!” When he pressed down, the false bottom in the drawer rose, revealing a thin, unlabeled folder. He turned to Nureyev, smug, and whispered, “Told you.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “Lucky guess.”

“No, I told you, you have to think like a criminal. Not that you’d know —”

Peter shut him up with a kiss, languid, his sharp teeth catching Juno’s bottom lip. Juno tried to suppress a gasp and failed. He could feel Peter laughing against his skin, sharp puffs of air dancing across his mouth. Peter pressed one hand against Juno’s waist, letting a finger slip under his shirt and dance coolly across his warm skin, and—

And a door opened somewhere in the apartment.

They snapped apart, Peter closing the drawer silently and Juno stashing the file under his shirt. He pressed a hand to the small button attached to his sleeve that would send an alert to Jet, waiting outside the building in the RUBY-7 for them to finish the job. He stood, pulling Peter up with him, and ran his eyes over the office, checking that everything looked the same as it had when they arrived. It did, and if it weren’t for the file under his shirt — and, likely, the money now lining Peter’s pockets — it would be like no one had entered at all.

They hadn’t used comms for this mission, since the building had too many sensors for them to sneak the tech in unnoticed, but the call button Rita had designed buzzed once against Juno’s palm, signaling Jet’s presence directly underneath the window, even if the shields had

left the RUBY-7 invisible. Juno tried not to get dizzy as he looked out the window to the street below. He failed. He averted his eyes as Peter slid the window open, silent as a fox.

As Peter climbed out the window, Juno let his eyes sweep back over the room one last time. From that angle, he could see a piece of paper that had fallen out of the file and onto the ground under the desk. He darted forward and snatched it up as silently as he could, even as Peter gasped out his name and footsteps approached the door. Before he could shove the paper into his pocket, his eye caught on one word: “Nureyev.”

When they got back to the ship, Juno brought the folder back to the room he shared with Peter — a marvel to him even now, months after they had sorted everything out about their relationship — and locked himself in the bathroom. He pulled the crumpled paper out of his pocket, extracted the rest of the file out from under his shirt, and began to read.

Their mark, who went by the code name "Hermes," had been involved in some of the finances for the Board of Fresh Starts. This job had been one in a series of jobs they’d had to tie up the loose ends of that company, even after its stronghold had been destroyed and its slaves freed. Hermes had, they had hoped, kept records of his sales, some of which would hopefully point to any groups threatening the victory they had won.

This was worse than Juno had imagined, though. The file contained only a few sheets of paper, carefully tucked away, and the buyers Hermes had dealt with were listed on the first page. Most were unfamiliar, but a couple names stood out: “New Kinshasa” was one, and the acronym “GAS” was another. And through it all, horrifyingly, the name “Nureyev,” again and again and again.

As he read, though, Juno began to piece together what the file meant. There was a list of political prisoners — people who had been arrested for trying to disrupt the construction of a new Guardian Angel System on Brahma, as well as on the other two inhabited planets in its system, Vishnu and Shiva. From the file, it looked like construction on the GAS had been completed on Brahma and Vishnu, and was nearly completed on Shiva. Massive protests and riots had broken out on all

three planets, only to be largely quelled by the system and its lasers. The file didn't list a death toll, but Juno could imagine it was astronomical.

The political prisoners caught his eye. Some of them were what he would have expected- regular people, mainly listed as being from the poorer districts of Brahma and Shiva, who were sentenced to death or to life in prison for sabotage, violence, and a hundred other fabricated crimes. Most of them had taken measures to disguise their faces, though, covering themselves in tattoos and scars to fool the facial recognition programming that made the Guardian Angel System so dangerous. Under those faces, the name that popped up, time and time again, was "Peter Nureyev."

Juno sat back on his heels and scanned through the rest of the documents. It wasn't all of them, he realized, but it was clear that most of the prisoners who had taken steps to conceal their identities were using Peter's name. The reason became clear soon enough- one of the prisoners was listed as a founder of the "Nureyevists," who were described in the file as a terror group, one that would stop at nothing to destroy the Guardian Angel System and loosen New Kinshasa's hold on the Veda planetary system. The file listed known terrorist "Peter Nureyev" as an inspiration for the movement. The reward for his capture, alive or dead, was listed at half a trillion creds.

Juno's vision swam.

So this was what they had missed after more than a year of working tirelessly to take down the Board of Fresh Starts: a revolutionary movement building in the Outer Rim, back where Peter had lost his guardian and his name and everything he was. He had sacrificed so much, Juno thought, recalling the fear that had pierced him as he watched Peter kill Mag, the red-tinted horror still so fresh in his mind. And now they had expanded the Guardian Angel across a whole system, and hundreds of people had been arrested trying to tear it down, inspired by the brave escape of a teenage boy twenty years before.

God, he had to tell Peter.

Shakily, Juno rose to his feet. He took a couple of deep breaths, trying not to look in the mirror for fear of the shock he would see on his own face. He could hear Peter shuffling around in the room, probably changing into comfortable clothes or checking his comms. Juno closed his eyes and breathed once more, then opened the door before he

could stop himself.

Peter lay on the bed, wearing only a pair of boxer briefs and one of Juno's larger sweaters, barely long enough to brush his navel. When Juno opened the door, he set his book down, spine-up, on his stomach. As soon as his eyes met Juno's, his grin faltered.

"Juno? Darling, what's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Juno sat on the edge of the bed and did his best to give a reassuring smile and failed miserably. Peter sat up, brows furrowed, and wrapped a hand around Juno's wrist.

"Darling, you're scaring me," he said.

Juno nodded and handed the file over to him.

"Is this the file from Hermes's desk?" Peter asked.

Juno nodded.

Peter opened it.

For all Peter's talk about concealing emotion, about having a good poker face, about putting on personalities like masks, he was surprisingly easy for Juno to read. As he scanned the file, his eyes narrowed minutely, and his grip grew tighter on each page. Juno wrapped one arm loosely around Peter's waist, watching worriedly as he read the list of names, then the reward, and then the description of the new Guardian Angel Systems. When he had finished, Peter closed his eyes for a moment, then sighed. When he spoke again, his voice was shaking.

"I should probably explain," he said, letting out a small huff of nervous laughter.

Juno sighed. "Nureyev—"

"Just give me a moment, please, Juno."

"You don't have to explain."

Peter gave him a tight smile. "You deserve to know, Juno."

Juno kissed him softly, wrapping his other arm around Peter's chest and pulling him closer. "I already know, Peter."

Peter froze.

“Sorry," said Juno, pressing a kiss to Peter's cheek. "I should have told you sooner. It’s what I saw, when we were back on Mars. With, uh, with Miasma.”

Peter nodded slowly, then let his head come down to rest on Juno’s shoulder. “Oh,” he said quietly. “How much?”

“All of it,” said Juno. “New Kinshasa, and the reactor, and Mag… All of it.”

“Okay,” said Peter.

Juno rubbed one hand slowly across Peter’s back, tracing up and down his spine, feeling him shiver slightly. They stayed that way for a couple of minutes, Juno holding Peter firm, until finally Peter let out one last, shuddering breath and sat back up.

“We’ll have to report to the others. They’re probably waiting for us.”

Juno nodded. “What do you want to tell them?”

Peter sighed. “I don’t- I’m not sure. I want to tell them, I do, but…”

Juno ran a hand through his hair. “I mean, what do you want to do?”

“I don’t know,” Peter said. “I want to help. I can’t— Juno, if they’ve expanded the Guardian Angel system, I can’t just leave it. It has to be destroyed. It’s killing people right now. It’s been killing people for years, and I’m the one who let that happen. If there’s any way I can help, I have to try.”

He caught Juno’s eye as he fell silent. The look he gave to Juno was a desperate one, a harrowed one, full of regret and fear. Juno smiled sadly and brought one hand up to wipe away the tear that had begun to roll down Peter’s cheek.

“Okay,” he said. “Then we help. We ask the others to come with us, and we go join a revolution. Why not?”

Peter closed his eyes. “I can’t ask that of them. It’s too much.”

“We just brought down an entire evil corporation that was keeping people as slaves because they had hurt Vespa. All of that, just for her. You think they’ll say no to us doing this for you? And if not for you, for the people who are dying, right now, because of that system?

Because of that government?" He stroked Peter's cheek again and pulled him forward until Peter opened his eyes and met Juno's once more. "Nureyev, I think they'll help. I think they'll do whatever you ask them to. And even if the rest of them won't, I'm with you. Whatever you want, we'll do it together."

Peter nodded once more, giving Juno a weak smile, and ran a hand across his face. He took a deep breath.

"Okay," he said. "Let's talk to the others. Give me a minute, though, I need to put on some pants."

Juno chuckled and kissed Peter on the cheek, right where the tear had stopped. "Okay. I'll let them know you're coming."

Peter gave him a small smile. "Thanks." Then he grasped Juno's hand. "You know I love you, Juno."

Juno squeezed his hand and smiled. "Yeah," he said. "I know."

When everyone had gathered in the kitchen but Peter, Juno began.

"All right," he said. "I'm going to ask you something, and I'll explain why in a second, and I know it's going to be kind of out of left field, but don't worry about it. Ransom and I want to take down the government of New Kinshasa, and we want your help."

He pulled out the file and passed it around, explaining its contents. There were no pictures of Peter Nureyev in the file, thankfully, but there was a description of his crime and information about the reward. Buddy, Vespa, and Jet were all familiar with his history, and Buddy in particular seemed intrigued by the intel, asking question after question about the security in Hermes's building, whether or not there had been references to any other offices, and how thoroughly Juno and Peter had searched the building.

"Look," Juno said after Buddy asked him, again, if they had searched for hidden compartments. "We did a good sweep. This was all we found. Hermes clearly has another office somewhere, or all his stuff is digital."

Rita shook her head, her massive top knot shaking along with it. “Nuh-uh, boss,” she said, pointing to her comms screen, which she had enlarged so they could all see it. “Look, if he had something digital, it would be here, see? I already checked all the standard stuff- mail, personal files and devices, even his notepads, and it wasn’t there, so I went to see if he had any encrypted apps- real shady stuff, you know, except some people just use it to talk to each other, I guess- and I couldn’t find any on this network, so then I thought, Ooh, what if he has an encrypted network? And so that’s that bit of code, there, working on that, but I don’t think there’s anything there, Mistah Steel, so it’s gotta be a physical copy or I guess he could have it memorized, but that seems like an awful lot to memorize…”

Juno stared at the screen again uselessly. The lines of code were complete gibberish to him, even with Rita’s explanation, but he got the gist of it and shrugged.

“Guess he’s got a good memory,” he said.

“Or he’s not our top dog,” said Buddy. “Just a low-level consultant they brought on — someone who wouldn’t ask too many questions.”

“Point is, this is what we have,” Juno said. “Look, I know this is a lot to ask. We barely have any intel, and this is a high-risk mission. They probably already have Buddy and Vespa’s faces on record, and they could easily have mine. Stepping foot on Brahma will kill us instantly, and getting anywhere near it will bring New Kinshasa down on our asses faster than you can say ‘totalitarianism.’”

“That is not especially fast,” Jet pointed out. “‘ Totalitarianism’ has eight syllables.”

“If you don’t want to help us, you don’t have to,” said Juno. “But we’re going to do this. It’s important to Ransom, and it’s important to me. We’d appreciate it if you guys were part of that, too.”

“If it’s so important to him,” Vespa asked, “where is he?”

“Oh,” said Peter from the hallway behind them, “I’m right here. Just wanted to change, isn’t that right, Juno dearest?”

Peter had, in fact, changed out of Juno’s sweater and his boxer shorts. That part wasn’t surprising. What did surprise Juno was the outfit Peter was wearing- long, loose pants, with ballet flats and a red button-up, unbuttoned almost to his stomach — Juno tried very, very hard not to stare at the exposed strip of his chest and failed

spectacularly — with a long, golden pendant resting just below his collarbone. He wore simple makeup and his favorite silver ear cuff, and his hair was unstyled, curling just above his forehead. It was the simplest outfit Juno had ever seen Peter wear around the others, the most casual and nervous, his long, slender fingers tangled together in a tense pattern.

“Hello,” he said, giving them all a nervous smile. “My name is Peter Nureyev, and I’m a wanted terrorist.”

[image]

In which new alliances are forged

Chapter Summary

“Rita’s the one who sent you the video, right?” she asked.

Peter smiled. “If you’re about to ask, then yes, she is the Rita you’re thinking of.”

“But she’s hacked into Dark Matters forty times and never gotten arrested.”

“Yep.”

“She disabled the security system for the entire Gefion bank.”

“Yes.”

“She projected the finale of Man of the Hour: A Man Who Lives a Whole Life Every Hour, and it’s Sort of a Benjamin Button-Style Love Story Where His Wife Cherishes the Few Fleeting Minutes Every Day Where They’re The Same Age, But Most of the Time She Has to Care for Him as a Baby or an Old Man, So It’s Kind Of Bad on Both Ends onto every screen in Hyperion City when they erected that monument to Ramses O’Flaherty in the main square of Newtown.”

“She’s very talented.”

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: Violence mention, murder mention, Ramses O'Flaherty mention

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Juno glanced at his watch for what felt like the millionth time, then let out another sigh.

“I don’t trust this,” he said.

Peter rolled his eyes. “Jet’s just outside, dear,” he said. “We’re fine.”

“It’s taking too long,” Juno said. “They should be done by now.”

Peter fixed him with a sharp look. “Buddy and Vespa know what they’re doing.”

Juno just bit his lip and nodded, his eye fixed firmly on the door. He glanced down at his watch again — ten minutes since the last update, and twenty since Buddy and Vespa had called to say their meeting had finally begun.

Their conversation the previous week had gone better than Juno had dared to hope. He hadn't expected Peter to open with his name, and had spent about two minutes staring blankly as Peter explained his entire history — Brahma, Mag, the Guardian Angel System, and about thirty different aliases — to the others, briefly but completely.

The others had taken it in stride, apparently, and had quickly moved on to discussing his proposal: namely, that they join in the rebellion against New Kinshasa, using Peter's identity as a selling point, and take down the Guardian Angel System once and for all.

"Of course we'll help," Buddy had said, her grin sharp and dangerous. "And we'll do it as a family."

So here they were, a week later, preparing for a meeting with representatives from the Nureyevists on a neutral moon in the Outer Rim. Buddy and Vespa were meeting with them now, confirming that they were, in fact, the people they said they were. Jet was waiting outside in case anything went wrong, and Rita was watching from the RUBY-7, ready to sweep in and rescue them if anything went wrong. It was, as Buddy had said, a good plan, but not airtight, and Juno had spent the last half hour pacing, fidgeting, and generally panicking about the possibility that this could all be a trap.

As he shoved down the anxiety that something was wrong for the thousandth time, his comms beeped.

"We're sending them through," Buddy said. "They're clean."

Juno hummed distractedly.

Peter reached over and squeezed Juno's hand. "I know you're nervous," he said, "so I'm going to say this now. If you really, truly believe that we are in danger, we can leave. I'm not going to sit in a trap for no reason."

Juno met his gaze. Even now, months after they had gotten back together, the trust Peter had in him took his breath away. Something sparkled behind those dark eyes, fierce and protective, and Juno let himself breathe, focusing on the warm, grounding grip of Peter's hand.

“No,” he said. “I don’t think we’re in danger. I just don’t like the risk.”

Peter gave him a soft smile. “There’s no risk,” he said. “You’re here. We’re completely safe.”

Juno nodded, returned Peter’s reassuring hand-squeeze, and turned to the door as it opened.

The two people who entered looked about how Juno had imagined them. The first was a tall woman with long, dark hair tied in an elaborate bun. The second was a smaller person with muscles to rival even Alessandra Strong. Both were wearing mostly black and had painted their faces with strange, intricate designs in bright white paint that stood out against their dark skin — most likely, Juno thought, to fool facial recognition if they encountered any hostile cameras. The tall woman sat immediately at the table they had set out, and the shorter person settled behind her. Peter gave Juno’s hand one last, reassuring squeeze, then joined her at the table, with Juno at his back.

The woman cleared her throat. “Shall we begin?”

“I assume you’re Ruslan, then?”

“Yes,” she said. “And you’re the great Peter Nureyev, hmm?”

He gave her a tight smile. “The one and only.”

“I don’t suppose you have any proof, do you?”

“Of course,” he said, pulling a thin file out from his jacket and sliding it across the table to her.

As she leafed through the file, Juno stole a quick glance at her partner. They were staring directly back at him with a hard, stony glare that made Juno want to squirm. Instead, he returned their gaze steadily, with as much cold confidence as he could muster. They quirked an eyebrow, unimpressed.

He’d never had a good Rangian poker face.

“This all seems to be in order,” said Ruslan. “What do you think, Khabib?”

The shorter person leaned down, skimming quickly over the file. They grunted. “Rafael Vadovas, hm? So you’re the one who stole the Haoss Emerald?”

Peter grinned. “The very same,” he said. “It was simple, really; the guard schedule was lax at best, and the owner—”

Khabib scoffed. “A common thief,” they said. “Not worth our time.”

Ruslan smiled. “You’ve built quite the impressive resume,” she said, “but this is hardly proof of your identity.”

“It’s a detailed account of my movements for the past twenty years,” Peter pointed out. “Surely that’s worth something.”

“Perhaps it is,” she agreed, “but proof it is not.”

Peter nodded. “I was afraid you’d say that,” he said. “All right.” He pressed lightly against his ear, and Juno heard the faint beep of his comms. “Rita? Would you be so kind as to display that security footage I asked for?” He paused. “Ah, yes. Thank you very much.” Then he swept his hand out, enlarging the image projected from his comms.

It was fuzzy, but the setting was unmistakable. The footage showed the old reactor room for the Guardian Angel System, its faint red light filling the screen. As they watched, two figures emerged from just underneath the camera. Juno recognized them immediately.

“Nureyev,” he muttered, but Peter simply shook his head, a motion so small as to be nearly imperceptible. The two figures crossed the screen, clearly arguing. Juno took a step forward and took the fabric of Peter’s sleeve between his fingertips, curling his finger into the warmth of Peter’s arm. Peter leaned into the touch.

The clip played out. Juno watched as the smaller figure — *God, but he looked so young* — pulled a knife on the taller, threatening him wildly. Just before that knife had made its way into Mag’s back, Peter paused the tape and zoomed in on the image.

“There,” he said. “That’s Peter Ransom. He and his father, Mag, were attempting to disable the Guardian Angel System. Unfortunately for Peter, Mag hadn’t shared the extent of his plans, and everything went awry. Peter was able to make his escape, but his father didn’t make it, and in order to keep New Kinshasa from crashing and killing the Brahmans below, he left the Guardian Angel System running.”

Peter fixed Ruslan with a smooth glare. “Peter Ransom was, of course, an alias, and one that I have recently revisited. My real name is Peter Nureyev, and it seems your people are aware of my previous efforts to

bring down New Kinshasa's greatest weapon while protecting the innocent lives below. This video shows the moment I gave up my identity and became the person you see before you now. If you'd like to watch the rest of it, I can ask my friend Rita to send it to you, but I ask that we stop here, as I'd prefer not to revisit the rest. It's… unpleasant, to say the least."

Ruslan nodded, then leaned forward to examine the video more closely. "All right," she said. "It certainly looks like you. We'll need to take it, though, along with the rest of your file, and let our people vote."

Peter smiled coldly. "Of course," he said, with a strangely detached tone. Juno pressed his finger more firmly into Peter's arm.

"If they say yes — and that's *if* they say yes, not when — you wouldn't have any special protections. It would be a boost to morale, certainly, and from your records I admit you're more than capable of working with the highest level of organizers within this rebellion, but we're entirely democratic, and your fame won't grant you any points with our fighters."

Peter nodded. "I hadn't expected any special treatment," he said. "I'd just like to help."

"Good," said Ruslan. "Now, your friend Buddy mentioned your little crew, and while your resume is certainly impressive, I must say I'm much more intrigued by your colleagues. How did you come to work with the most infamous crime duo in the galaxy?"

Peter explained how Buddy had invited him to join the two of them and Jet — "Jet Siquliak?" Khabib asked, disbelieving, and Peter nodded proudly — and how they had, along with Juno and Rita, taken down the Board of Fresh Starts, as well as most of its subsidiaries. Ruslan nodded along, impressed, until Peter had finished his story.

"Rita's the one who sent you the video, right?" she asked.

Peter smiled. "If you're about to ask, then yes, she *is* the Rita you're thinking of."

"But she's hacked into Dark Matters forty times and never gotten arrested."

"Yep."

“She disabled the security system for the entire Gefion bank.”

“Yes.”

“She projected the finale of *Man of the Hour: A Man Who Lives a Whole Life Every Hour, and it’s Sort of a Benjamin Button-Style Love Story Where His Wife Cherishes the Few Fleeting Minutes Every Day Where They’re The Same Age, But Most of the Time She Has to Care for Him as a Baby or an Old Man, So It’s Kind Of Bad on Both Ends* onto every screen in Hyperion City when they erected that monument to Ramses O’Flaherty in the main square of Newtown.”

“She’s very talented.”

“You know *that* Rita?”

“She was *my* secretary first,” Juno grumbled.

Khabib glanced at him. “And who are you?” they asked.

“This is Juno,” Peter said. “My partner. He’s part of this, as well.”

“What are his credentials?” Ruslan asked.

“My credentials are shut up,” Juno said. “He’s not doing this alone. We’re a package deal.”

Peter smirked, clearly fighting down laughter. “Do we have a deal?” he asked.

Ruslan smiled. “We’ll take it back to our people. We can’t make a decision without a vote. But I suspect they’ll approve.”

She reached out a hand, and Peter took it, shaking it with a firm confidence that Juno couldn’t bring himself to feel. Khabib put a hand on Ruslan’s shoulder, and she stood, gazing back at Peter and Juno with a new fire in her eyes.

“I think,” she said, “that this is going to be very good for the both of us.”

[image]

Chapter End Notes

Art by noir-martian

Beta'd by looking-for-destroya (bigmcworm on ao3)

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In which Juno meets an old friend

Chapter Summary

> *“That is Jovian leather.”*
>
> *“And?”*
>
> *Peter fixed him with a cold, dangerous glare. “And there is mud all over your shoes.”*

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for this chapter: Guns

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Juno fired his blaster once, then again and again, his finger working steadily against the familiar resistance of the trigger. Raised his arm, fired, and lowered it. Repeated, again and again, the same way he had for months now. Years, even, before he’d lost his eye and his aim.

When he’d had enough, he hit the button that brought the practice sheet of metal toward him and examined it. No bulls-eyes, sure, but looking over his shots he could see three or four that would stop an attacker in their tracks, and a whole lot more that would make them hurt.

Not good enough, he thought, and then stopped himself, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. *It’s better than last time,* he corrected himself. *I’m improving. That’s what matters. It doesn’t have to be perfect.*

Beside him, Jet had raised his arm and fired two efficient shots. From what Juno could see of Jet’s sheet, they were both bulls-eyes: one in the head and one in the heart. Lethal.

It had started right after Juno joined the crew, when he had been sent on a mission with the others, blaster in hand, and had known that if anything went wrong, he wouldn’t be able to protect them. That night, he had spent hours down here, in the small shooting range in the belly of the ship, until he’d emptied out an entire blaster card. Then he’d just sat on the ground, shaking, until Jet had showed up the next morning and gently corralled him to bed. Since then, the two of them had met here at least once a week — more, if Juno was feeling especially powerless — to shoot in silence together until one or both

of them decided to call it quits. It was one of Juno's favorite routines, and a good way to ground himself when the world got a little overwhelming.

"I'm done," he said, gesturing to his practice sheet.

Jet nodded. "As am I," he said. He glanced at Juno's sheet. "Very impressive," he said. "You made some good shots."

Juno grinned. "Not so bad yourself, big guy," he said. "Guess you win this round."

"I was not competing," Jet said.

"Boss!" Rita yelled, her voice carrying down the stairs, followed by the light but indelicate thump of her footsteps. A moment later, she peeked through the door, eyes wide behind her glasses. "Oh! Hey there, Mistah Jet," she said, grinning and stepping into the room. "I didn't realize you were down here, too."

"We were just leaving," he explained. "We have finished using the training equipment, and now I am going to eat lunch."

"Okay, Mistah Jet," Rita said. "But, ooh, don't forget we've got our date night tonight, okay?"

"We are not dating," Jet pointed out.

"No, I mean our stream night, you know?" She turned to Juno. "We've still gotta finish *The Time Warrior, or How to Avoid the Authorities with Time Travel by Traveling to a Time When Your Crimes Have Been Legalized,* and then we gotta watch *The One Where The Witch Falls In Love With Her College Roommate and Then, Years Later, They Reconnect But For Some Reason She's Also In Love With a Scarecrow, But They Make It Work,* and don't even get me STARTED on *Forbidden Fruit: The Story of Two Grapes That Fell in Love.*"

"Do not forget the one you were telling me about this morning," Jet said. "Though I seem to have forgotten the title."

"Oh, yeah!" Rita exclaimed. "*The Fastest and the Furiousest.* They say it's gonna be the last one in the franchise but honestly, Mistah Jet, they've been saying that for years, and I found some stuff on Jeremiah Cohen's personal email that makes me think they *miiiiiiiight* be making another, and-"

“Rita,” Juno said, “I’m sorry to interrupt, but were you coming down here to tell me something, or did you just want to chat?”

“Oh!” she yelled. “Sorry, boss. Miss Buddy wanted you upstairs. She said you had a meeting to get to.”

“Shit,” he said, glancing down at his wrist before remembering that he didn’t wear a watch. He tried to turn the motion into something halfway between scratching his arm and adjusting his sleeve, like the incredibly smooth criminal that he was. When he glanced up, Rita didn't seem to be buying it. He cleared his throat. “Yeah, uh, I do.”

“It’s okay, boss,” she said. “I’ll just tell Mistah Jet about our movie, and you can go on up. I know you don’t really like all those action-y, car crash-y, explosion-y types of movies. You get going, now.”

Juno gave her a quick pat on the head as he passed her, then headed up the stairs, the sound of her voice fading behind him as she lectured Jet on some stream or another they had been watching. He made a detour through the kitchen, grabbing a protein bar as he went, then headed to the garage, where Buddy, Vespa, and Peter were waiting next to the RUBY-7.

“Took you long enough,” Vespa grunted.

Juno winked at her as he took a bite of his protein bar. “We ready to go?” he asked through a mouthful of chocolatey mess. Vespa just scowled and slid into the passenger seat.

When they were all settled, Buddy pressed a small button on the RUBY-7’s console to open the garage door, then engaged the autopilot and settled in for the ride. Juno leaned back against the door and put his feet up on the seat between him and Peter, tucking his toes under Peter’s thigh. Peter, scandalized, swatted at his leg.

“That is *Jovian leather,*” he said, wrinkling his nose at Juno in disgust.

“And?”

Peter fixed him with a cold, dangerous glare. “And there is *mud all over your shoes.*”

Juno rolled his eyes, kicked off his boots, and put his feet back up on the seat. Vespa cackled.

It took about four hours to reach Ninurta, the small planet at the far

reaches of the Enuma system. From its surface, Utu, the small star it orbited, looked like any of the other stars in the sky. With so little light from its sun, the planet existed in permanent darkness, with a night sky that took Juno's breath away. The planet had very little atmosphere and, aside from the small building at its southern pole, was completely uninhabited.

As they drew closer, Juno realized the building was much bigger than he had initially thought. It was a large, rectangular structure, dotted on all sides by a sprawling pattern of smaller square buildings, all connected by a complex web of tunnels and pipes. There were no windows on its exterior; in fact, until they were very close, Juno had only seen it because he had known to look for it. Without the coordinates they had been sent, it would have been nearly undetectable. Juno suspected that had been by design; after all, it wasn't exactly smart to broadcast your location when you were trying to stage an uprising against an unfathomably rich and powerful government with a floating laser death city.

When they finally landed outside the receiving building for the base, a large, rectangular door slid open, and two figures in oxygen helmets beckoned them inside. Once the RUBY-7 had been parked, the door slid closed, and Juno felt rather than heard the vibration of the atmospheric induction jets, filling the building with air. The larger of the two figures gave a thumbs up when the vibration stopped, so Juno followed the others out of the car.

The figures pulled off their helmets, revealing two familiar faces. Khabib gestured for the others to follow, but Juno's attention was elsewhere — namely, on the woman standing before him, tucking her oxygen helmet under her arm.

"Didn't think I'd see you out here, Steel," she said.

"Alessandra?"

She laughed. "Hey, Juno. Nice to see you again. It's been a while."

Stunned, Juno stuttered for a moment. "Yeah, uh, wow. Hi. Nice to see you too. Guess you got home after all, huh?"

Alessandra shrugged. "Yeah. Took a while. Good to see you didn't die of radiation poisoning in the middle of the desert. Glad you made it out of there, but it would have been nice to hear something from you after all that."

Juno grimaced. "Yeah," he said. "Alessandra, I'm sorry. I should have called, or something."

Alessandra hummed. "Yeah, you should have. But, uh, thanks for apologizing. I'm just happy to see you."

"Yeah, I'm happy to see you, too. Surprised, but happy."

Peter sidled up next to Juno, sneaking an arm around his waist. “Juno, dear,” he said, “I think some introductions are in order.”

“Oh,” Juno said. “Yeah. Right. Uh, everyone, this is Alessandra Strong. She was another PI back on Mars. Alessandra, this is everyone. Buddy and Vespa,” he said, inclining his head towards them, “and then this is, uh...”

“Peter Nureyev,” said Peter, reaching an elegant hand out to Alessandra. “Charmed, I’m sure.”

Alessandra grinned and shook his hand. Juno stifled a grimace as he felt Peter tense next to him — she had a wicked grip, and Juno knew the sound of bones popping when he heard it — and watched him withdraw his hand as soon as she let go.

“Nice to meet you all,” she said. “I’ve heard a lot about you from my friend Khabib here.”

Khabib grunted in affirmation.

“Yeah,” said Juno. “We’ve met.”

“Oh, good,” said Alessandra. “Hope they didn’t talk your ear off.”

Khabib ignored Alessandra’s jab and gestured to the rest of them. “Follow me,” they said, gesturing toward a door on the far wall.

The six of them made their way through a maze of hallways, each painted the same dull beige color, with cheap tiled floors and walls thin enough that their creaking made Juno very, very nervous. It occurred to him how little money a rebel movement would have to construct a secret planetary base and how thin the material was that separated them from the vacuum of space. He leaned in closer to Peter.

After what felt like miles, Khabib led them to a plain, unmarked door. They knocked, then opened it, gesturing the others through. Juno

followed Alessandra and Peter into the room and then froze.

They were in a large, circular amphitheater, ringed by hundreds of people. In front of them, sitting at a small table in the center of the room, was Ruslan. She gestured to the empty chairs to her sides, each of which had a small card in front of it with one of their names. Alessandra took the seat directly opposite Ruslan, and Khabib closed the door behind them, standing in front of it rather than sitting. Peter and Buddy sat at Ruslan's right and left, respectively, leaving the seats next to Alessandra for Juno and Vespa.

Though the room was filled with people, it was eerily silent. No one made a sound or, as far as Juno could tell, reacted in any way to their arrival. The only noise in the place was the scrape of chairs against the tile, a harsh, keening sound that shot directly up Juno's spine and sat at the base of his skull, throbbing like the beginning of a killer headache. When he was seated, he balled his hands into fists under the table, letting his dull fingernails dig into the flesh of his palm with a small but grounding sting.

"Okay," said Ruslan. She shuffled the papers in front of her and looked first to Buddy, and then to Peter. "Are we ready to begin?"

They nodded, and Ruslan smiled. She tapped lightly at her ear, and suddenly her voice was magnified throughout the amphitheater.

"Hello, everyone," she said, folding her hands neatly in front of her. "As you all know, we are here today to discuss the best role for our new recruits in this movement. Last week, you and your comrades voted to allow Peter Nureyev, Buddy Aurinko, and their crew into our organization. Today, we will discuss how best they can assist us in overthrowing the government of New Kinshasa and establishing a fair and just system on Brahma, as well as its neighboring planets.

"Because the four of you are new, I will briefly explain our process. We hold public meetings in this room once a week, discussing any new developments that we feel are relevant. Motions can be brought, debated, and voted upon, either by our leadership or by the public. We do hold some private meetings, but the vast majority of the decisions made by this organization are publicly decided in meetings just like this one. To keep things efficient, the people allowed into the room are rotated each meeting, so that everyone has the opportunity to bring issues to the table, should they see fit."

"Not very efficient," Vespa muttered. To Juno's surprise, her voice was

amplified throughout the room.

“Are we all mic’d?” Juno asked.

Ruslan smiled. “Any conversations held at this table are public matters, and they will be heard by the public.”

“Great,” Juno said. “Thanks for the consideration. Would have loved to know that before I sat down.”

“Anything you have to say to me in these meetings, you can say to the public.”

Buddy leaned forward. “If I may, Ms. Ruslan, I’d like to begin by asking for your vision of our roles in this revolution. You’re familiar with our work, and you know where our strengths lie. I’m interested in your group’s needs, especially as they pertain to Pete and I.”

Ruslan nodded. “Our immediate needs,” she said, pulling out a file and sliding it towards Buddy, “are as follows: first and foremost, soldiers on the ground. Always necessary, always valuable. You will be asked to join them, at some point. Everyone is required to go planetside at least once, including me. You would be there to protect the civilian protesters in the case of police retaliation, or to accomplish a specific objective, depending on where we sent you.”

“I assume that isn’t your only need,” Peter pointed out. “Certainly we have more valuable skills than our ability to dodge laser fire.”

“Less common skills, perhaps,” said Ruslan, “but there are few things more valuable than the ability to stay alive. It’s a skill you’ll need often, here, but based on your past work I have to conclude you’ve had plenty of practice.”

Juno suppressed a snort. *Understatement of the century.*

Ruslan gestured to Buddy and Vespa. “The two of you,” she said, “are galactically-renowned criminals. Your exploits have been infamous for decades, and, as everyone here should know, you recently stole the Cure Mother from the Board of Fresh Starts, simultaneously destroying their empire and offering a second chance at life to millions of people. The galaxy owes you a debt of gratitude.

“As for Mr. Nureyev here, he was part of that operation, and he has been at the center of several high-profile crimes that have targeted predators, corrupt officials, and all those who seek to harm others for

their own benefit. He was also the man who nearly brought down the Guardian Angel System twenty years ago and proved that the people of Brahma can rise up against New Kinshasa and create a free and fair land for all. He is the namesake of this movement, and his involvement will surely serve as an inspiration for all those impacted by our revolution."

Eyes bright, Ruslan pressed a button on her comms, pulling up footage of a town square filled to the brim with people, each of them covering their faces with masks, hoods, and scarves. "This riot took place one week ago," she said. "It was organized entirely by citizens of Brahma, with no direction from the higher levels of this movement. Together, they were able to tear down hundreds of security cameras, making it much harder for New Kinshasa to target individual protesters and their families. They distributed literature, left graffiti, and hijacked government programming to show our allies that they would not cave to New Kinshasa's demands. All this with grassroots organizing, the details spread by word of mouth, with no fancy celebrity endorsements or political leaders leading the call. What can they do with our reach across the system? With our hackers, our weapons, our support?"

Juno snuck a glance at Peter. He was enraptured by the flickering footage in front of him, his eyes bright, a smile ghosting across his lips. Juno had seen Peter like this only a few times before, deep in the bowels of a ventilation system or in a hidden computer room, tantalizingly close to their mark. It was anticipation and fear, pure adrenaline, the glare of a cat before it pounced. Juno loved it.

Ruslan leaned forward. "Ms. Aurinko and Mr. Nureyev have volunteered to be the faces of this revolution. As such, they will both be making appearances on film pieces that we will insert into New Kinshasa's news broadcasts, giving hope and support to the planetside rebels and delivering coded messages that will allow us to coordinate riots and protests for maximum impact. They will also be on the front lines on Brahma, leading the charge when we attack key Brahman infrastructure. They will interact with and inspire the people. They will be monumental assets in this war."

"Hang on," Juno said, Ruslan's words catching up to him. "They can't go planetside."

Ruslan glanced at him. "As I said earlier, Mr. Steel, they will receive no special treatment-"

“It’s not ‘special treatment,’ though,” Juno pointed out. “Look, you already said that Buddy is a galactically-renowned criminal, and Nureyev is number one on New Kinshasa’s most-wanted list. If the government has any data on either of them, they’ll be blown to bits the second they step foot on Brahma. There’s no point in sending them down if they’re gonna die before they can help anyone.”

Alessandra nodded. “He’s right,” she said. “We’ll have to find out if they’ve been added to the Guardian Angel databases before they get anywhere near Brahma or Vishnu.”

Ruslan considered for a moment, then inclined her head towards Juno. “Okay,” she said. “Your Rita can help our people get into those databases to find out if they have enough on record to target Ms. Aurinko or Mr. Nureyev. If they do, erasing that data will be priority number one. If not, they go planetside.”

Vespa leaned forward. “Another thing,” she growled, glancing up at Juno. She met his eye with that strange, cool intensity of hers, her face serious, her green hair hanging over her forehead. “Wherever they go, we go with them. I go with Buddy, and Steel goes with Nureyev.”

“Agreed,” said Ruslan, “provided it does not conflict with our security protocols.”

Juno laughed. “Yeah, right,” he said. “I thought you were all for collaboration and communication? We go with them wherever they want. No matter what.”

Ruslan glared at him. “Do not be flippant, Mr. Steel. I would not bar you from accompanying Mr. Nureyev unless it were of the utmost importance. I cannot guarantee that the two of you will be able to accompany them everywhere; however, I do guarantee that every effort will be made to keep you together, and that, in such a case where you may not accompany them, we will work with you to create alternate arrangements.”

“No way,” said Vespa. “We stay together.”

“This is a matter of security,” said Ruslan. “It is non-negotiable.”

Juno opened his mouth to argue again but was stopped by the firm pressure of Peter’s hand on his forearm. He glanced up to find Peter gently shaking his head. Juno frowned, meeting Peter’s gaze with a silent question: *Are you sure?* Peter gave him a soft smile.

“That’s acceptable,” Peter said.

Vespa’s mouth fell open in indignation, but Buddy beat her to the punch. “I agree,” she said. Vespa slouched back in her chair, clearly fuming. Juno imagined his expression looked a lot like hers.

“If that’s all settled, then,” Ruslan said as Vespa and Juno grumbled, “we will conclude this meeting. Alessandra, if you would show our guests to their room.”

Alessandra nodded at the four of them. “All right, everyone,” she said. “Follow me.”

As soon as they were out of the amphitheater, Juno grabbed Peter’s arm. “What the hell, Nureyev?” he hissed.

“I know,” he said, laying a hand gently over Juno’s. “I don’t like it, either.”

“Why the hell did you agree to it, then?”

Peter glanced at Alessandra’s back, then leaned in closer to Juno and muttered, “I don’t want to anger them. If it helps, I don’t think we’ll have to worry about it anytime soon. If a problem comes up, we can address it then. Is that okay?”

Juno looked up at Peter. In the stark fluorescent light, it was obvious that Peter was exhausted. In the weeks since they had met with Ruslan and Khabib back in Enuma, Peter had barely slept. Juno had woken up several times to find Peter sitting up beside him, reading or watching a movie. On the worst nights, Peter hadn’t been there at all, and Juno had been forced to track him down through the bowels of the *Carte Blanche,* finding him pacing well-hidden corridors at all hours of the night. He refused to tell Juno why, exactly, he wasn’t sleeping, but Juno could guess that the possibility of finding himself back on Brahma after all those years wasn’t exactly easy to deal with.

Juno nodded, then squeezed Peter’s arm one last time before taking his hand. “Okay,” he said. “I trust you.”

Peter smiled. “Thank you, Juno.”

Alessandra brought them to another nondescript hallway, which ended with a pair of nondescript doors. Alessandra opened one to reveal a small room with a double bed.

“You’ll stay here when you’re on the base,” she said. “From what I hear, though, you won’t be here often. Buddy, Vespa, you’re next door.”

“Thanks, Alessandra,” Juno said. “Really. It means a lot, knowing you’re here too.”

She shrugged. “I’m just glad to know you’re okay,” she said. She turned to Buddy and Vespa. “And it was nice to meet you two. Can’t say I’m a fan, per se, but I’m familiar with your work, and it’s impressive.”

Buddy smiled. “That’s very kind of you,” she said.

Alessandra glanced at the rest of them. “You should rest up,” she said. “I’ll be here to grab you bright and early in the morning.”

“Great,” grumbled Juno. “So no sleeping in?”

Alessandra let out a bark of laughter. “Not a chance,” she said, making her way towards the door.

“Thank you very much, Ms. Strong,” said Peter. “It’s been a pleasure.”

Alessandra’s eyes were bright when she turned back to look at them all. It suddenly struck Juno that this was all real- that this was the start of something incredible, something exciting, something important. That same determination was echoed in the eyes of his companions, the same determination they’d all shared a year earlier, sitting down for that first family meeting upon the *Carte Blanche.* He knew that Rita and Jet shared that excitement, too, even if he couldn’t see them. The sudden certainty was overwhelming.

“Of course,” said Alessandra, her face breaking into a stunning grin. “I can’t wait to get started.”

[image]

Chapter End Notes

Art by noir-martian

Beta'd by looking-for-destroya (bigmcworm on ao3)

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In which Peter becomes a movie star

Chapter Summary

“Well,” Juno said, glancing at Vespa.

She glared at him. “Well what?”

Juno shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m very uncomfortable.”

Chapter Notes

(Alternately titled: In which I steal more plot from *Mockingjay*)

I want to give an additional shout-out this chapter to Andy Signs for his help on this chapter.

No warnings for this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

True to her word, Alessandra showed up the next day at the ass-crack of dawn — at least, what would have been the ass-crack of dawn on a planet that wasn’t as far away from its star as Pluto was from the sun. As it was, Juno only knew what time it was because he glanced at the clock on his comms for the precise purpose of letting Alessandra know exactly how ridiculously early it was.

One long-winded tirade later, Peter was dressed and ready to go. Meanwhile, Juno had barely managed to sit up.

“Come on, darling,” said Peter, pulling Juno to his feet. “We don’t want to be late.”

“Speak for yourself,” Juno muttered, pulling on a pair of pants. Peter doodled absently while he waited for Juno to stumble into the bathroom and shave.

By the time they made it out of the room, Buddy and Vespa were waiting, both looking as exhausted as Juno felt. Alessandra brought the four of them to a small dining room, complete with a buffet table covered in pale, bland food. Juno headed straight for the coffee pot and, in the ten minutes that they spent there, managed to gulp down three cups of coffee. He grabbed a fourth as they left, letting its warmth spread through him to fight off the cold air of the base.

After another series of twisting tunnels, Alessandra brought them to a large room, full of cameras and people dashing from one side of the room to the other, shouting directions to each other that Juno couldn't begin to understand.

"All right," said Alessandra. "Here's where I leave you."

"You're not staying?" Juno asked.

"No," she said, waving to someone in the crowd. Juno tried and failed to follow her line of sight, but she must have received some answer, because she turned back to them and nodded. "I have other stuff to do, Steel. Not exactly an actress. I'll see you all later, okay? Let me know how it goes."

"But—" Juno began, but as quickly as they had arrived, Alessandra was gone.

"Great," he said, peering through the crowd. "And here I was, thinking we were gonna get to stay with her."

"Nice to know you have other friends, Steel," Vespa said dryly.

"Ha ha," said Juno. "Look, sometimes it's just nice to see a familiar face, okay?"

From behind them, a familiar voice shouted "Juno? Juno Steel?"

"*Aaaaaand,* sometimes it isn't."

He turned just in time to see her shoving her way through the crowd. With her trademarked acid-washed hair longer than he had ever seen it and her signature style replaced with the same dark coveralls as everyone else on set, he almost didn't recognize her. There was no mistaking that hungry grin, though- that was all Kanagawa.

"Hey, Cassandra," said Juno. "So tell me, did all of Hyperion City show up for this revolution, or was it just the couple of crazy people I happen to know?"

"I figured you'd show up sooner or later," she shot back. "Never could stay out of trouble for long."

"I thought you were in prison."

"I thought you were on Mars. Guess we're all surprised."

“Miss Kanagawa,” Peter said, inclining his head towards her. “It’s been too long, really.”

Cassandra’s eyes narrowed. “Rex Glass, wasn’t it?”

Peter smiled, cold and sharp. “I think you know exactly who I am.”

“I hear you’re my big star.”

“Oh, dear. I suppose I’ll have to get over my stage fright.”

“Yeah, Cecil mentioned you were camera shy. Guess now I know why.”

“Wait,” said Juno. “When did you talk to Cecil?”

“Oh, he’s here,” said Cassandra. “Political prisoner. Don’t worry, he’s having the time of his life. He loves being the center of attention, after all, even during an interrogation. He's made friendsk. Apparently he just got married.”

Who’d be crazy enough to marry Cecil Kanagawa? Juno thought, but before he could say anything, two men, nearly identical to each other, joined them. The first cleared his throat and looked to Cassandra.

“We’re ready on set,” he said.

The other looked to the rest of them. “Hey,” he signed. “I’m Pollux, and that’s my brother, Castor. We’re gonna be your directors of photography.”

Before Castor could translate, Juno laughed. “You’re from Oldtown, too?” he signed.

Pollux grinned. “Shit,” he signed. “Guess we aren’t the only ones who left, huh? How’d you know?”

“I’d recognize OTSL anywhere,” Juno replied. “Mars’s shittiest accent.”

Pollux snorted. “Look who’s talking.”

“Juno” said Buddy, “care to introduce us?”

Castor smiled at the rest of them and quickly translated what Pollux had said. “It’s nice to meet you folks,” he added. He looked to Juno. “Where’d you learn OTSL?”

Juno shrugged. “My brother was Deaf,” he said, fighting to keep a casual tone. “So was my friend’s dad, so he taught the rest of us. Teachers hated it; they made Benten get a hearing aid when he was nine, but he had a habit of 'losing' it.”

Peter leaned almost-imperceptibly closer to Juno, brushing a hand against Juno’s arm. Juno’s breath caught in his chest as he realized just how long he'd been talking about his brother. He leaned into Peter's touch.

“This is all very sweet,” said Cassandra, “but we’re on a tight schedule. Nureyev, you’re with me. Aurinko, you’re up next, so stay nearby. Vespa, Juno, you can just hang out, I guess. Don’t really know why you’re here.”

“We go where they go,” said Vespa, resting a hand protectively on Buddy’s back.

“Great. Cool. I don’t care,” said Cass. She beckoned them all further into the room, then directed Peter towards one makeup chair and Buddy toward another. She rushed off to bark orders at everyone else, leaving Juno and Vespa in one corner.

“Well,” Juno said, glancing at Vespa.

She glared at him. “Well, what?”

Juno shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m very uncomfortable.”

Vespa snorted. "You and me, both, Steel."

It felt like hours before Peter and Buddy had been released from makeup. Each of them had been given a simple dark jumpsuit to wear that matched the ones Juno had seen on everyone on the base. They were each taken to opposite corners of the room, with Cass bouncing in between and occasionally yelling at them both.

“You have to repeat the sentence exactly,” she said, scolding Buddy. “It’s got important information. The exact wording is literally the entire point. Again!”

Peter, meanwhile, had slipped into what Juno recognized as Duke Rose — attention-grabbing and flashy, without any substance behind his eyes. Cassandra had to stop him four times before she finally snapped.

“It can’t just be some character! It has to be *you!*” she yelled.

“It *is* me,” Peter said through gritted teeth.

Cassandra rolled her eyes. “I’ve seen you on a con, Nureyev. I know what acting looks like. You can’t just slip into some stage persona and act like you own the place. These people have been fighting this war for a year. They’ve lost family and friends, and some of them have nothing left besides this fight. They’ve had to bullshit their way through life to stay safe. You think they can’t smell bullshit when you put it in front of them? It has to be *authentic.* You have to really reach these people, and you can’t do that if you don’t meet them where they are. You’re from Brahma. You’re a legend to these people. You can’t just put on a shiny new coat of paint and act like the rich assholes they’re trying to overthrow.”

Peter grimaced, but then he nodded, taking a deep breath and clenching his fists. “Give me a minute,” he said, meeting Juno’s eye. Cass turned to see Juno watching and nodded tightly.

“Take five,” she said, beckoning Juno towards her. When he arrived, she gestured at Peter angrily. “Talk to him. If I do it, I'm gonna punch him.”

Once she had walked away, Juno leaned in toward Peter. “You good?” he asked, running one hand along Peter’s forearm.

Peter let out a shaking breath. “No,” he said, “but I agreed to take this job.”

“You don’t have to do anything you’re not comfortable with.”

Peter laughed. “Yes, I do,” he said, meeting Juno’s eye with a sad intensity. “I signed up for this. I said I wanted to help. This is how I can do that.”

Juno nodded, then bit his lip. “Okay,” he said. “So look for me. I’ll be right behind the camera. Act like you’re talking to me. Pretend we’re the only people there.”

Peter glanced at the ground. “You really believe I can do that?” he asked, so quietly that Juno almost missed it.

“I do,” Juno said. “How many times has your acting saved our lives?”

“This is harder than acting,” Peter said. He bit his lip nervously. “It’s

real."

"I know," said Juno. "You can do it, though. Just say it to me like I'm the only one there."

Peter took a shaky breath, then smiled, his nervousness hidden once again — not behind the mask of Duke Rose or Rex Glass but behind the shining trust of Peter Nureyev. "Okay," he said. "I'm ready."

Juno stepped quietly behind the camera as Cassandra ran around getting everyone to their places. Buddy and Vespa joined him, holding onto each other tightly and not letting go.

"We're rolling," Cassandra yelled, and silence fell. "Okay. Action."

Peter turned to the camera, his eyes falling just below where Juno was standing. He spoke with a quiet ferocity, repeating back each line that Cassandra fed him. He emphasized the importance of their movement in opposing tyranny and oppression in the galaxy. He reminded everyone listening that their lives were in constant danger, that they were only alive at the whims of a small group of un-elected officials with infinitely more money and power than anyone on the surface of Brahma. He railed against the symbolism of the floating city and against the inequality it represented. He urged the citizens of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva to band together, reminding them that the greatest strength they had was strength in numbers.

"When I was young," he said, repeating Cassandra's words as though he'd come up with them on the spot, "my father and I tried to stop the Guardian Angel System from terrorizing Brahma. Now, the influence of New Kinshasa has spread, and its tyranny has only grown. I ask you all to join me in this fight. Fight back against the oppression you face! Fight back against the masters you never chose! Fight back, and win freedom from New Kinshasa!"

As he fell silent, the room froze, breathless. Peter's eyes danced wildly around the room, faltering in a way Juno had never seen him falter before, not with so many people there to see. He straightened himself up and stood, awkwardly, until Cassandra had the presence of mind to yell "Cut!"

As soon as she did, the room erupted in applause. Peter stared, bewildered, as people turned to each other and shook hands, hugging and laughing together. Juno rushed forward, Buddy and Vespa at his heels, to wrap a hand around Peter's waist. The three of them formed a bubble around him, shielding him from the people who had begun

to rush forward to discuss Peter's performance.

"Nice work," Vespa muttered, shooting Peter a smirk. Buddy grinned at him proudly; Peter returned a shy smile and wrapped his arm around Juno's shoulders, looking suddenly drained and exhausted.

"You know," Juno said, glancing up at Peter, "I think we just might win this one."

[image]

Chapter End Notes

Art by noir-martian (on Tumblr) aka @random_jocelyn (on twitter)

Beta'd by looking-for-destroya (bigmcworm on ao3)

Find me on tumblr as hundred-separate-lines

In which they start a riot

Chapter Summary

> *“It’s not your fault,” Vespa replied. There was a long pause, broken by the sound of something shifting. “I just - Ugh. I was worried.”*
>
> *“Just say the word and I’ll pull back.”*
>
> *Another pause. “No,” Vespa said finally. “We knew what we were getting into. We knew there were no guarantees.”*

Chapter Notes

> Chapter warnings: Violence, police brutality, blood and injury, guns

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Juno kept his hand pressed firmly in Peter’s, trying his best to brace Peter against the roiling of the crowd. The shouting was so loud and disjointed that, even without the masks they wore to disguise their faces, Juno wouldn’t have been able to hear a thing that Peter said; instead, he kept himself as close as possible, trying his best to keep them together without words. On his left, Buddy was shouting along with the rest of them, her arm looped through Juno’s. With his good eye covered by clear plastic goggles, it was hard to keep an eye on the two of them.

It had been barely a week of filming various propaganda pieces before Rita and Jet had given the okay for Peter, Buddy, and Juno to head onto Brahma’s surface. New Kinshasa had facial data on Buddy, but with her mask and the elaborate face paint that she had applied, even the high-tech sensors on the surface would be unable to pick her up. Vespa, on the other hand, had been barred from the mission, since the government had biometric data on her, likely purchased from the Board of Fresh Starts. She was waiting on the ship, along with Rita and Jet, both of whom had finally come to pick the others up from the base and bring them to Brahma.

Juno wanted to be relieved to be out of that place, but here, in the midst of an angry mob, he was too preoccupied by the tight pit of worry that had sunk deep into his abdomen, clouding every thought. Every movement was a possible threat — police or laser fire or dogs or whatever the hell else they might have on this planet. From the

moment they'd hit soil, Juno had kept half an eye on Peter, refusing to let go.

Peter, for his part, hadn't spoken since they landed. It was his first time back on Brahma since Mag's death, and Juno could guess that it had brought up some unpleasant memories. Peter had been pale all morning as they'd headed toward the city of Phendei Thmei. Ever since they had disembarked, his grip on Juno had been just as tight as Juno's grip on him. He was shouting along with the crowd, but it was obviously a show, at least to Juno. Unlike Juno, he and Buddy needed to be recognized, so his mask only covered the lower half of his face, leaving his worried eyes exposed. Juno understood the role Peter played, but he was still unnerved by every person who stared openly at the celebrity in their midst.

Behind them, Castor and Pollux, outfitted with small portable cameras, were filming the chaos of the crowd. They had been instructed to stick close to Peter, which made Juno feel marginally better about the whole endeavor, but they were also supposed to get footage of the thousands of masked people around them to show the strength of the Nureyevists. Juno had only half-payed attention to Ruslan's brief the night before, focusing mostly on Peter's mission, which involved taking down one of the more prominent cameras in the main square. Once he'd done so, he was supposed to pass it down to the crowd so they could destroy it, which was supposed to raise morale or something. Ruslan had insisted that Peter had to be the one to bring the camera down, so Juno swallowed his trepidation and clung to Peter's side.

"Let the people see him," she'd said. "Let him be a force for good."

Frankly, all Juno cared about was getting them in and out as quickly as possible.

"All set?" came Vespa's voice over his earpiece. She was camped out in the Carte Blanche with Rita, while Jet waited in the RUBY-7 somewhere just outside the crowd.

"All set," Buddy confirmed. It was strange, hearing her voice crackling in his ear without hearing anything from her mouth. The crowd had somehow gotten louder, all of a sudden, which Juno hadn't thought was possible. He watched as four figures climbed up a large pole and began to rip a camera from the top, throwing chunks of metal and wire down into the crowd below.

“Ok,” said Vespa. “Start to press forward. You need to get to the front of the crowd.”

“And be careful!” came Rita’s sharp voice. Juno winced. “There’s a lotta police up there, and I don’t want you getting hurt, Mistah Nureyev, you understand me?”

When Juno glanced at Peter again, he was smiling softly — the first smile Juno had seen from him all day. “Yes, Rita,” he said. “Thank you.”

They began to push against the backs of the people in front of them, making their way forward as quickly as they could. Even with their faces covered, people parted as soon as they saw Peter. Juno wondered how many propaganda pieces they’d seen with his face, already. Some of them reached out to touch him or Buddy as they passed, but Juno kept pulling them forward, letting Castor and Pollux flank them and fend off anyone they deemed unsafe.

In what felt like hours but must have been minutes, Juno spotted the front of the crowd, trapped behind a police barricade that stretched across the entire square. There were at least half as many officers as protesters, at a glance, dressed in riot gear and holding huge plastic shields. No lasers had been fired yet, but Juno suspected that had more to do with the risk of hitting an officer than of killing an innocent civilian. He did his best to angle himself so that Peter and Buddy were at least partially behind them, but it was difficult with the crowd, even as it parted to let them through. Peter’s hand stayed tight in Juno’s, though, and Buddy’s arm was still looped in his, so he kept pulling them forward, pushing slowly towards the armored police.

It was like trying to sneak up on a wall: granted, the wall probably didn’t see them coming, but it wasn’t exactly going to scream and run away when they got there.

A few rows back from the barricade, Juno finally spotted the camera. It was behind the third row of police — there was no way they’d be able to get to it. Juno was about to say as much into his earpiece when, from somewhere behind them, the first bottle was thrown.

It arced perfectly above the crowd, leaving a small trail of smoke in its wake. The small piece flaming cloth that had been shoved into the opening fluttered like a fiery flag in the breeze. Juno watched as it fell perfectly behind the barricade in almost-slow motion, shattering over the head of an officer and sending flames dancing down his armor.

It was not alone.

In seconds, the barely-controlled chaos of the crowd had erupted into screams and flames. Even as the laser fire began, the crowd surged forward, ripping aside the barricade like it was nothing and leaping onto the police. Buddy was ripped away from Juno instantly, along with Castor and Pollux, and Juno was left hanging onto Peter as best he could, pulling him towards the camera and dodging rubber bullets and truncheons like it was the only thing he had ever done. Rita squealed in Juno's ear, trying to direct him toward a corner of the crowd where Jet could get to them quickly.

Peter, unfazed by the chaos, kept moving forward. The crowd had quickly opened a path to the camera. *Did they know this was going to happen?* Juno thought, and then *Did Ruslan? Was this all part of the plan?* Peter pulled them through with the sort of purpose Juno had only seen in him during police chases and poker. He darted in between officers until he had reached the base of the camera tower, at which point he began, quickly and precisely, to climb.

Juno stayed at the base of the tower, his gaze jumping from cop to civilian, eyes peeled for the slightest hint of a threat. Within seconds, a cop was on him. Juno managed to throw him off, but not before taking a blow to the head that knocked his earpiece loose. It fell to the ground and was lost among the shuffling feet, leaving Juno without Rita's frantic commentary. He didn't have time to mourn the loss; another body was hurled toward him, and Juno pushed it off with ease, trying to direct the confused protester away from the horde of police to his left. He sneaked a glance up at Peter, who had almost reached the top of the tower, and was rewarded with a truncheon hit to the thigh. The cop who had hit him was quickly swept away by the crowd, and Juno was left hissing with pain.

Seconds passed like minutes. Pieces of metal began raining down on the crowd, which surged forward with excited intent. The dull roar of thousands of voices left Juno dizzy and disoriented. He stumbled forward with the protesters, then fought against them towards the tower, caught in the riptide of humanity around him.

Just as Juno made it back to the base of the tower, Peter dropped down next to him, his knife drawn. He wrapped his hand around Juno's arm and tugged him toward the nearest edge of the crowd. The faint movement of his lips against the cloth of his mask was the only indication that he'd informed Jet that they were coming.

Moving against the crowd was much, much harder than moving with it. Juno had to shove his way through cops and protesters alike, and he took more than one elbow to the face, knocking into his goggles and sending throbbing pain through his face.

He pulled Peter alongside him, desperate to get him out of the street. Between his height and his recent fame, he stood out in the crowd, and already several groups of cops were heading their way. Just as they reached a less crowded area, though, a grey metal canister hit Juno in the arm and bounced to the ground, spewing white gas.

“Shit!” Juno yelled, pulling Peter away from the cloud of tear gas. Peter coughed, doubling over as his eyes began to water. Juno wrapped his arms around his waist and shoved, breaking through the last layer of the crowd.

“You okay?” he shouted. His voice sounded strange and distant, even as the roar of the crowd began to fade. Peter was saying something, but his voice was too quiet and strained for Juno to hear. He had squeezed his eyes shut, so Juno guided him through the crowd, searching desperately for the familiar green of the RUBY-7. Just as he’d decided they were in the wrong spot, it swooped into view, horn blazing. The door to the back seat flew open, and Juno pulled Peter in behind him.

“Nureyev,” he panted as the door closed.

“I’m all right, Juno,” Peter grunted.

“Does he require medical attention?” Jet asked.

“We got tear gassed,” Juno explained. “Guess the Nureyevists ordered an angry mob for lunch and left us to pick up the check.”

The RUBY-7 beeped, and a small vial popped out of the dashboard. Jet passed it back to Juno, who opened it and grabbed a rag that had descended from the ceiling, soaking the rag in whatever liquid was in the vial and grabbing Peter’s face as gently as he could. He tilted Peter’s face forward and began, gently, to wipe the skin around his eyes. Peter made a small, pained noise.

“Where is Buddy?” Jet asked.

“Not sure,” Juno replied. “We got separated when the barricade went down. I lost my comms. You haven’t heard from her?”

Jet shook his head. “I have not,” he said, “but my orders from her were clear. I am taking the two of you back to the ship. I will return for Buddy when I am done.”

“What?” Peter hissed. Juno soaked the rag again and held it to Peter’s eyes.

“You are injured. You require medical attention. Vespa will be able to provide adequate medical care, while Juno and I will not. I will drive quickly. Buddy can care for herself until I return.”

“You can’t just leave her,” said Peter, fighting to open his eyes against the sting of chemicals. He tried to push Juno’s hand away, but Juno, undeterred, shoved Peter’s arm down and ran the rag back across Peter’s face.

Jet had already started the engine. “I will not argue with you,” he said. “I am following Buddy’s orders. If you would like to debate them with her, I suggest you do so when you have been treated for your wounds.”

Peter looked for all the world like he was going to argue again, so Juno clapped a hand over his mouth. “How did it look from above?” he asked as Peter sputtered against his palm.

Jet glanced back at the two of them in the rear-view mirror as the car began to hover and accelerated toward the quickly-darkening sky. There was a faint hint of a smile in his eyes, which was, as far as Juno was concerned, a victory in itself.

“It was an imposing show of force,” said Jet. “I do not think this rebellion will be easy to ignore.”

Juno grinned. “That’s what I like to hear, big guy.”

When they arrived on the *Carte Blanche,* Vespa and Rita were sitting at the same kitchen table they had used to plan every heist for the past year. Rita was surrounded by projections of camera feeds, blueprints, and police memos, and seemed to be having about forty conversations at once.

“I know you’re looking for Miss Eleanor, Mx. Price, but right now I’m looking at arrest records and they’re only just coming in, so they definitely don’t have mugshots yet — okay — yeah, hold on — Mr.

Electrum, I'm working on those video feeds now, and I'll have footage for Miss Kanagawa by — yeah, I know, but — okay, hello Miss Kanagawa, I *know* you want the footage, but right now I'm trying to find Miss Buddy in the system, and ooooooh, look! They're back!"

As soon as she squealed in greeting, Vespa's head darted up from the video screen she was examining with a frantic focus. Her eyes swept quickly over all of them, settling on Peter, who was still holding the rag to his eyes.

"Tear gas?" she asked.

Peter nodded.

"Okay," she said. "Med bay. Come with me. Steel, stay here and help Rita."

"But—"

Vespa jabbed a finger at him. "*Don't. Argue.*"

Juno held up his hands in surrender and left Peter to follow Vespa toward the medical station she had assembled in an old store room. He sat down next to Rita, who was still chattering away on her comms. Jet gave her a silent salute, which she returned with enthusiasm and a bit too much momentum, and then turned and headed back toward the hangar.

"Any news?" Juno asked.

Rita shook her head. "Nothing yet. No hospital or arrest record matching her, so I'll bet she's holed up with some rebels somewhere. Oh, boss, you don't look so good, your eye's swelling up like a balloon, and your ear's bleeding, and—"

Juno shrugged. "It's fine, Rita," he said. "I'll head over to Vespa in a minute. Just let her finish with Nureyev, first."

Rita fixed him with a skeptical glare, but soon she was back to chatting with Cassandra about footage and arrests and police reports as they came through. Juno sat patiently, trying to ignore the throbbing pain in his face that he had managed to suppress until Rita had brought it up.

An hour passed like that. Vespa returned, having sent Peter to shower and rest, and shoved an ice pack into Juno's hands. He took turns

pressing it on his eye and his ear, watching the door to the hangar and the screens that Rita kept cycling through with growing, insistent concern. Rita was the only source of noise; the ship was eerily quiet without Buddy's usual jokes. Vespa picked at the skin around her thumbnail until it began to bleed, then did the same with her forefinger. Rita opened and finished a bag of salmon dusty crunchies. Juno nibbled on an apple. Vespa chewed the inside of her lip.

When the message finally came over the comms that Jet had found Buddy, Vespa let out a barely-suppressed sound of relief that tugged horribly at Juno's insides. The ten minute wait for the RUBY-7 was almost unbearable, but soon enough the door to the hangar had opened once more. Buddy limped inside, favoring her left leg, and Vespa quickly dashed toward her and ducked under her arm, helping her to shuffle toward the med bay. Juno ran forward to help, but Jet shook his head, grabbing Juno's sleeve and pulling him back.

"I think they will want to be alone for a while," he said.

Juno nodded. Instead of following, he made his way back to his and Peter's room, grateful for the chance to rest. When he reached it, he opened the door to find Peter asleep in their bed, the skin around his eyes still puffy and irritated. Juno leaned down and kissed him on the forehead before stripping out of his dirty clothes. He climbed into bed beside Peter, snaked an arm around his waist, and fell into a deep and relaxing sleep.

When Juno awoke, Peter was moaning quietly beside him.

"Nureyev?" he mumbled, sleep still clouding his thoughts.

Peter just groaned miserably. His eyes looked puffier than before, and he was rubbing at them in his sleep. Juno grabbed his hands and pulled them gently away from his face.

"Peter," he whispered, "stop that. Wake up."

Peter's face wrinkled the way it did when he was too warm and comfortable to get up. Juno glanced at the time on his comms — a little past nine. He shook Peter's shoulder gently.

"Do you want me to go get some eye drops from Vespa?" he whispered.

Peter scrunched up his face, yawned, and nodded, then pressed his face into the pillow. He was sleeping again in an instant. Juno pressed a kiss to his cheek, then quietly slipped out from under the covers and pulled on a tee shirt and leggings.

Juno crept quietly to the med bay, his bare toes curling against the cool floor of the ship's hallway. It was quieter than it would normally be so early in the evening; usually, the sound of Rita's streams would permeate the ship, interrupted by an occasional bout of laughter. As it was, the quiet groaning of the ship's various systems was the only sound Juno could hear, at least until he approached the med bay. As he did, the faint mutter of Buddy and Vespa's voices drifted toward him.

"Today was bad," Vespa was saying. "I didn't know if you were hurt, or dying, or imprisoned, and there was nothing I could do about it."

"I know," Buddy said. "I'm sorry, Vespa."

"It's not your fault," Vespa replied. There was a long pause, broken by the sound of something shifting. "I just — Ugh. I was worried, Bud."

"Just say the word and I'll pull back."

Another pause. "No," Vespa said finally. "We knew what we were getting into. We knew there were no guarantees I just… I need you to be safe."

There was a soft sigh, and then the faint sounds of a kiss. Juno paused, then took a quiet step backwards. He hesitated, torn between giving Buddy and Vespa some privacy and getting medicine for Peter.

Before he could decide, the choice was made for him. The door opened with a soft creak, and Buddy limped out, nearly running into him in the cramped hallway.

"Oh," she said. "Juno. I didn't expect— Darling, what happened to your face?"

"Elbow," Juno replied. "What happened to your leg?"

"Rubber bullet," Vespa said from behind Buddy. She leaned around the doorway and glanced at Juno "Do you need something?"

"Eye drops for Nureyev," he said.

Vespa gave him a once-over, then sighed. “Get some sleep, Bud," she said. "Steel, get in here. I don’t want to be out here any longer than I gotta be.”

Juno gave Buddy a tight smile, then squeezed past her into the med bay. It was a messy room, about the same size as his bedroom, with a small cot pushed into one corner. The rest of the room was filled with tables, drawers, and instruments that looked more like ancient Martian torture devices than medical equipment. Vespa gestured to the cot, and Juno frowned.

“I’m just grabbing medicine for Peter.”

“Sit down, Steel,” she said. “I wanna take a look at your eye. Besides, I know you, and I bet you have at least three injuries that I haven’t seen yet. Shirt off.”

Juno raised an eyebrow but complied, sitting cross-legged on the table and pulling off his tee. Vespa had turned her back to him and was digging through a huge box of medications. When she’d found Peter’s eye drops, she turned and tossed the bottle toward Juno, who caught it and placed it gently on top of his shirt. Vespa returned and began inspecting the swelling on his eye and ear before going over his torso and arms, checking for injuries. She pulled out a bottle of antiseptic gel and tried to unscrew the top, but her hands were shaking too violently. After her third attempt, Juno gently took the bottle and opened it for her, then handed it back.

“Vespa?” he asked softly.

She grunted, beginning to spread the cool gel onto a long scratch across his neck.

“Are you okay?”

Vespa took a shuddering breath, then met Juno’s gaze with her cool, piercing stare. She stayed like that for a minute, searching for something in Juno’s eye while he tried not to flinch away from the intensity of her glare.

“Vespa?” he asked again.

She broke the eye contact, glancing back down at another wound and continuing her ministrations. “I’m fine, Steel,” she grumbled.

“You were worried about Buddy,” he says. “That’s normal. It’s okay.”

She glared at him. “You think I don’t know that? I’ve been worrying about Buddy for longer than you can— Ugh. I’m fine.”

“Vespa…”

“Look, Steel,” she said finally, refusing to meet his eye. “You need to be prepared for whatever might happen to them.”

She stood back, then grabbed a roll of bandages off of the table next to her. She fiddled with them while she spoke, winding and unwinding them with a manic energy that frightened Juno. “I already knew what it was like to lose her,” she said. “Have you even thought about what it might be like if they don’t make it out? Do you know what you’d do if he didn’t come back?”

Juno thought back to the chaos of the protest, to the way he had clung to Peter for dear life, the way his heart had stopped every time the crowd nearly pulled them apart. “No,” he said, choking on whatever words of comfort he’d been prepared to offer. “I don’t.”

Vespa nodded and began bandaging his wounds. Her hands had stopped shaking, and she was as quick and methodical as she normally was. When she was finished, she gestured to Juno’s shirt. He slipped it back on as quickly as he could. Vespa pressed a couple of weak painkillers into Juno’s palm, and he nodded at her. Then, he began the quiet walk back to his room, hurrying away from the med bay without looking back.

When he reached his room, he sighed, then opened the door, the bottle of eye drops clenched tightly in his fist. Peter was still asleep when he arrived, his face pressed into the pillow, so Juno sat down on the side of the bed and placed a hand on his shoulder. It was warm, solid, and real, and for a moment Juno was completely overcome by a sheer, blinding panic.

You need to be prepared for whatever might happen to them, Vespa had said, and Juno couldn’t help but hear the echo of those words as he gazed at Peter, sleeping through the pain of his injuries. He gave himself thirty seconds to have the realization that this rebellion was going to be dangerous — that Peter, invincible as he seemed, wasn’t guaranteed to make it through. The thought itself was enough to make his heart clench, to seize him with fear and indecision. He let the feeling pass through him like a wave, staring down at the man he loved, and then swallowed it whole.

“Peter?” he whispered, shaking him awake. Peter rolled over with a

groan, then blinked blearily at Juno. As soon as he closed his eyes again, he hissed in pain.

“I’ve got medicine for you,” Juno said.

Peter sat up enough to let Juno help him with the drops. He then let Juno give him a couple of painkillers and drank a glass of water before dropping back onto the pillow and into that same deep sleep that he’d been in all evening. Juno slipped back under the covers and pressed himself closer to Peter, who, unconsciously, buried his face into Juno’s neck and tangled one hand in Juno’s shirt. Juno held him for a moment, pressing his nose against Peter’s hair and inhaling the particular combination of sweat and spicy shampoo that made up his scent. Juno tried to take comfort in it, but the implications of his conversation with Vespa were still bouncing around in his head. With her words still in Juno’s ears, he fell into a shallow and uneasy sleep.

[image]

Chapter End Notes

Art by noir-martian (on Tumblr) aka @random_jocelyn (on twitter)

Beta'd by looking-for-destroya (bigmcworm on ao3)

Find me on tumblr as hundred-separate-lines

In which a diversion is planned

Chapter Summary

> *Just when the silence had begun to stretch for too long, Buddy cleared her throat. “Well,” she said, “we could always have a wedding.”*
>
> *Juno choked on his coffee.*
>
> *“A wedding?”*

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for this chapter: Ramses O'Flaherty mention (this is my favorite warning to do. crusty old bastard)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next planning meeting began with Ruslan applauding Peter and Buddy for their hard work. “Thanks to you,” she said, “and to the diversion created by the crowd, we were able to take down several key surveillance devices on Brahma’s surface. Nureyev, you single-handedly took down a Kinshasan camera, and Buddy, your quick thinking and ability to command meant thirty people were saved from unjust imprisonment.”

As she spoke, she gestured to the piece of footage that Pollux had shot. It showed Buddy and a group of protestors running between police vehicles and letting people out of the back seats, ushering them back into the crowd before the officers were even able to get out of their cars.

“Our next mission,” Ruslan explained, “will also require a diversion. If you would?”

Next to Alessandra, a round-faced man whose name Juno had already forgotten gestured to the blueprint that ze had spread out across the table. “Okay,” ze said. “Right. Uh, so this is a radio tower on one of Vishnu’s moons. It’s the one New Kinshasa uses to beam official government messages. This moon was manufactured to have an orbit that would allow any signal, no matter the time of transmission, to be either received by or bounced off of the radio dishes on every other moon in the system.”

“What does that mean, exactly?” Alessandra asked.

The man adjusted zir glasses. “Well, it means any message broadcast from this tower would be picked up by every part of the system almost-simultaneously, aside from, you know, the travel time for the actual signal. If you program it right, and as long as you aren’t broadcasting live, you can correct for the travel time by starting different signals with different delays, but it’s only a few minutes at the outside, so it’s not that big of an issue. New Kinshasa uses it for official broadcasts — propaganda, solar storm announcements, stuff like that. Anything where they’d need to communicate with the public at large.”

Ruslan smiled. “So far,” she said, “our broadcasts have been transmitted from rebel-held towers on each planet. That means we’ve had to encode timing directions in the instructions we send to each planet. It also means we’ve had to hope that our people are able to hold their positions long enough to transmit a message.”

“So are we seizing the radio tower?” Juno asked.

“No,” said the man. “We don’t need to take the tower to transmit from it. We just need to hack into their program and use it to beam out our own messages.”

“We have people working on that already,” Ruslan clarified. Juno took that to mean that Rita, specifically, was working on it.

“Right,” he said. “Why?”

“Well,” said the man, “it’s not really the radio tower that’s important.”

“There’s a shipment arriving on one of Krishna’s satellites in a week,” said Ruslan. “It contains a rare mineral from the Đại Đạo system. That mineral is essential for the production of the long-range lasers that the New Kinshasan government uses for the Guardian Angel System.”

“So, what?” Alessandra asked. “You want us to stop it?”

“Yes and no,” Ruslan explained. “Another team of rebels, based on Krishna, will be handling the actual intercept. Our job is to create a distraction.”

“Easy,” Vespa muttered. Juno stifled a snort.

“We’ll need to film a broadcast that can span several hours,” Ruslan said. “New Kinshasa has an emergency broadcast system that will automatically turn on all comms units, telescreens, and speakers on

each planet. We'll need something that can fill that much airtime and that looks like a coded message, even though it won't be."

"Why?" Alessandra asked.

"It needs to look like a coded message so that the government is more concerned with breaking the code than shutting the thing down," Ruslan explained. "But because they'll have so long to crack it, it can't actually be a message. We don't want to risk important information being intercepted for the sake of a three-hour distraction."

"Do you have something planned for this?" Peter asked. "Or are we creating a diversion of our own? I've been told I'm very distracting." Juno kicked him under the table. Peter's smile didn't waver.

"We wanted to involve you," Ruslan said, "because the two of you have achieved something of a celebrity status in the system."

For a moment, that took Juno by surprise. Then, he considered the weeks since Peter and Buddy had begun to appear in propaganda pieces. They had been met with stares and starry eyes every time they had returned to the base since the first one had aired. Even the crowd on the surface of Brahma had stared as Peter had stood among them. He hadn't even considered the effect that would have on the population at large.

Ruslan continued, "We were thinking this purpose would be served best by something positive — a bit of a 'pick-me-up,' if you would, to inspire hope in the rebels — but we don't have an idea in mind yet. We were hoping you could be of help."

There was a pause, during which they all racked their brains for a plan. Juno took the opportunity to gulp down some coffee, since no one was talking, and he always tried to watch out for moments when no one would say anything too surprising, since he was particularly prone to inhaling his beverages in moments of shock. He kept an eye on Ruslan as she waited for the others to speak. Her smile was carefully blank and expectant &mash; Juno didn't believe it for a second. He took another sip of coffee.

Just when the silence had begun to stretch for too long, Buddy cleared her throat. "Well," she said, "we could always have a wedding."

Juno choked on his coffee.

"A *wedding*?" he asked. Beside him, Peter straightened.

Buddy smiled. “It’s a very good distraction,” she said, “and certainly a boost to morale, especially for the guests. A bit of alcohol and some good food can lift spirits easier than the most resounding victory.”

“Sorry,” said Peter, his voice strained, “but I don’t think I quite understand. Who would be getting married?”

“Oh, that’s simple,” Buddy replied. She grabbed Vespa’s hand. “We would. Right, darling?”

Vespa nodded, her facial expression as stoic and unchanging as ever. “Right.”

“Ah,” said Ruslan, failing to hide her surprise. “Well, if you’re sure…?”

“We’re sure,” said Buddy.

“Right. If you’re sure, we’ll have to start planning immediately. We have someone in mind to help plan — Cecil Kanagawa, if you’re familiar with his work—”

“Oh, trust me,” said Juno, “we’re familiar.”

“— and I’m sure we can find wedding clothing for the two of you. We’ll have to find someone to perform the ceremony, of course, unless the two of you have someone in mind.”

Buddy grinned. “We do, actually.”

“Perfect. We’ll go over all the details in a bit. I’ll see if we can’t get someone to bring Mr. Kanagawa here for a meeting, and we can do a rehearsal tomorrow, so long as everyone hurries with the preparations. Should we reconvene in an hour?”

“Perfect,” said Buddy, her smile cold and radiant. “We’ll see you then.”

“Thank you,” said Ruslan. “I really think this is going to do some good. It’s a great idea.”

“I know,” said Buddy. "Mine usually are." She shook Ruslan’s hand, then beckoned the rest of them to follow her back towards their quarters.

As they walked, Juno jogged a bit to catch up with Vespa. He caught her by the arm and pulled her close enough to whisper; she glared

daggers at him, but slowed enough that they could speak.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked. “Did Buddy even ask you?”

Vespa shrugged. “We’ve talked about it before,” she said, her voice as sharp as the seven to twelve knives she consistently kept on her person. “I really don’t know why it’s any of your business, Steel.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it, I’m a worm beneath your heel, et cetera. Look, are you sure you want to do this so publicly, though?”

Vespa sighed. “No,” she said, “but I love her. And I’ve been thinking, right? If something happens to her — if something happens to *me* &mash; I don’t know.” She shook her head as though clearing it of unwanted thoughts, the way she had so often before they'd found the Curemother Prime. It broke Juno's heart a little to see her doing it now, but he understood. “I always wanted to marry her,” she said, her voice surprisingly soft. “I don’t want to lose that chance. And hey, if it helps us take down these shit-heads, it’s worth it, right?”

“Vespa,” Juno said, but she shrugged him off.

“Go talk to your boyfriend, Steel,” she said. “I’ve got about an hour before I have to go sit in another damn meeting. Let me enjoy it in peace.”

Juno raised his hands in surrender and let Vespa rejoin Buddy, slowing down enough to find himself next to Peter once more. Peter took his hand.

“All right?” he asked. Juno shrugged.

“Feels weird for Ruslan to take control of everything like this. I feel like anything she says goes. I mean, after all the anti-hierarchy stuff, you’d think she’d actually put things to a vote.”

“It’s flawed, Juno,” said Peter. “Of course it is. Every movement is flawed.”

“Yeah, well, I guess she just reminds me of an old boss,” said Juno, trying very hard not to think of ticking clocks and old toys. “Not the end of the world. But, hey, it’s been a while since I’ve been to a wedding. That could be fun. Not sure I have anything to wear, though.”

Peter grinned. “I can help you with that, if that’s what you’re worried

about, Juno, dear."

"Great," said Juno. "Good to know *someone* knows how to dress me."

"Yes, thank goodness you have such a capable partner," said Peter. "Though I will admit I was rather looking forward to *un*dressing you, such as it were."

Juno swatted at his side. "All right, all right," he said. Peter just smirked in his usual infuriatingly sexy style. Juno shoved his hands in his pockets for decency's sake. His fingers brushed against a torn scrap of paper and a tube of lipstick that definitely hadn't been there before. He glanced over at Peter and raised an eyebrow.

"Well," said Peter, determinedly not looking at Juno, "if I'm going to doll you up, I'm going to do it right. It wasn't a good color on Ruslan, anyway."

Juno rolled his eyes, but he didn't say anything.

Over the next few days, Peter, Buddy, and Vespa were invited to half a dozen meetings. Normally, Juno would have protested about his own lack of an invite, but frankly, he hated wedding talk, and he trusted Vespa to make sure nothing happened to Peter. Jet and Rita parked the *Carte Blanche* outside the base and took up residence in the next hallway down. Jet was also invited to those meetings, since he was officiating, which meant Juno and Rita had about five days to kill. They spent these hours locked in Rita's room, bingeing various rom-coms and complaining about the lack of good food on the base. Rita had smuggled in about fourteen bags of salmon dusty crunchies, ten face masks, and a manicure kit. She was in the middle of buffing Juno's nails when *Great Martian Bakeoff: Extreme Edition* ended on a shot of the surviving bakers, each tinged with the early signs of radiation poisoning as they stood under the baking tent (which was not inside any of the Martian domes).

Rita paused and reached over to start the next stream, pulling up a pirated version of *Pride and Prejudice* (20005).

"Is that the one starring Evelyn Knightley?"

Rita nodded and popped a salmon dusty crunchie into her mouth. "Did you know," she said, her mouth full of salmon-y grossness, "that she's actually the great-great-great-great grandniece of the lady from

the first *Pride and Prejudice* movie? You know, that lady who was in the original Star Wars trilogy, except she played the double for that other lady, you know, the one who was in that movie about those birds that hated each other, and also that one where she dated a god, and also *V for Vendetta?*"

"Damn," said Juno. "Rita, how many stream stars are the direct descendants of old Earth movies?"

Rita shrugged. "Most of 'em, I think, boss. Frannie says they grow them in tanks. She says there's a direct clone lineage of all the major stars of the 21st century, what with that old version of Northstar that copyrighted all their DNA after they consolidated the entertainment industry into the one-cowboy town it is today. But hey, they're releasing a stream with their first onscreen gay character this year!"

"Huh," said Juno, staring directly out of the computer and at you, the reader. "Well, the more you know."

Rita dug a hand back into her salmon dusty crunchies, then withdrew it with a sad sigh. She crumpled the bag into a ball and tossed it onto the floor. "You gotta get back here, boss," she said. "I'm still not finished with your nails."

Juno flopped his hand into her lap and leaned back against the headboard of the single bed that Rita had been allowed. Rita scooted into his lap and pulled his hand around to her front. As she buffed it, she rested her head back on Juno's shoulder.

"Mistah Steel?" she asked.

Juno hummed. "What?"

She paused. "Miss Buddy and Miss Vespa asked me to be their maid of honor."

Juno froze. "Oh," he said. He did his best to let himself relax back against the bed.

Rita turned her head. "You okay, Mistah Steel?"

He sighed and buried his face in Rita's shoulder. He took a deep breath, comforted by the familiar scent of the butterscotch lotion that Rita liked so much, and let Rita gently pat his hand. After a moment, he lifted his head again and nodded.

“Yeah,” he said.

Rita gave him a sympathetic smile. “Wedding stuff?”

Juno nodded. “Yeah. It’s just hard.”

“Have you talked to Mistah Nureyev about it?”

Juno shook his head. “Are you kidding? I’ve barely seen him since Buddy’s proposal. They’re all stuck in planning meetings all day. Which, also, now that I think about it, makes me wonder why *you* aren’t at those meetings, if you’re the maid of honor.”

Rita shrugged. “Guess they don’t need me to do much planning, seeing as they got Miss Ruslan and Mistah Kanagawa for all of that, and there’s not a whole lot of time for a bachelorette party, huh? Wish I could see their outfits before everyone else, though. I bet Miss Buddy’s gonna have something pretty special.”

Juno laughed. “Yeah, I wouldn’t be surprised.” He noticed that a subconscious wisp of longing had slipped into his voice.

Rita grabbed Juno’s arm and squeezed. “I’m sorry it’s hard, boss.”

“It’s okay,” said Juno. “At least I’ll have the second-prettiest person on this base for a date.”

Rita frowned. “Second prettiest?” Juno raised an eyebrow and nodded to her, and Rita’s face went beet red. She ducked her head, muttering “Aww, Mistah Steel.”

Juno laughed again, more softly this time, and squeezed her hand. “Okay,” he said. “Are you gonna finish this manicure or what?”

Rita nodded, then lifted her head. “Sure thing, Mistah Steel,” she said, and then bent over and dug in her suitcase for a moment, pulling out her fourth bag of salmon dusty crunchies with an “Ah-ha! Okay, you have some too. I got them for sharin’ and I don’t wanna see you going hungry.”

“I’m not eating those.”

“What?”

“I said, I’m not eating th-AH!”

Mouth stuffed full of salmon dusty crunchies, he leaned back and let

Rita tuck herself under his arm. She rested her head on his chest.

“There ya go, boss,” she said. “Now, when does Mecha Darcy show up again? He’s sort of a dreamboat, huh?”

They didn’t move for the rest of the night.

[image]

Chapter End Notes

Art by noir-martian (on Tumblr) aka @random_jocelyn (on twitter)

Beta'd by looking-for-destroya (bigmcworm on ao3)

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In which two knots are tied

Chapter Summary

Juno raised an eyebrow. “This is all feeling suspiciously planned-out.”

Peter shrugged. “First rule of thieving: Always be prepared.”

“I thought it was ‘Don’t set off the alarms.’”

“First rule of thieving: Never question the first rule of thieving.”

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: Implied sexual content (nothing explicit)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Juno swore as he tried for the fifth time to clasp his necklace. He fumbled with the clasp, his arms shaking with the effort it took to hold them up.

“Shit,” he muttered as he nearly dropped the whole damn thing. “Hey, honey?”

Peter stepped out of the bathroom, his shirt half-buttoned. He raised an eyebrow at Juno’s obvious discomfort before crossing the room and taking the necklace from Juno. He pulled it back to an appropriate length, then secured the clasp. The cool metal brushed against the hair at the nape of Juno’s neck, followed by the warm brush of Peter’s lips.

“Hey,” said Juno, without much heat. “Don’t get your lipstick on my dress.”

Peter pressed another kiss to the place where Juno’s shoulder met his neck. “Not wearing lipstick,” he muttered. He kissed Juno’s shoulder blade. “Haven’t finished my makeup.”

Juno turned and swatted at his arm. “You better hurry up then, beauty queen. We need to be there in half an hour.”

Peter grinned. He had brushed his cheeks with a silver-violet highlighter that matched the darker hues of his eyeshadow, but his lips were still bare. His eyeshadow perfectly matched Juno’s dress, a

high-neck, low-backed thing that swung out around his legs — a dress Juno could run in, and one in which he could hide his thigh holster, complete with a delicate little blaster that packed a mean punch. He knew Peter would have several knives hidden on his person, as well, and that most of the guests would be armed. It seemed excessive for a wedding, but then, it wasn't every day that the galaxy's most infamous thieves tied the knot.

Peter made his way back to the bathroom, and by the time he emerged, he was wearing an elegant white suit patterned with violet flowers. He brushed some silver onto Juno's eyelids and lips before helping Juno slip on an elegant eyepatch and wrapping a hand around Juno's waist.

"I hope you know how ravishing you look," he said, his voice low and heady.

Juno cleared his throat. "You, uh, you might want to wait until after the live, televised wedding to sweet-talk me."

Peter grinned and let one hand wander down toward Juno's waist. He leaned in and whispered, "Oh, Juno, dear, why ever would I do that?"

Juno laughed. "Watch it, Nureyev, or we might not make it there at all."

"A shame indeed, my dear detective."

"That's *ex*-detective, to you."

They made their way through the halls of the base to the room where Peter and Buddy had filmed all of their propaganda pieces. Unlike before, the space had mostly been cleared of equipment and stages. The edges of the room were dotted with strategically-placed cameras and their operators, but for the most part it looked like any other room on the base, aside from the white wooden arch that had been placed in the center of the room. There was a small band in the corner that was tuning a variety of instruments, and Rita was already standing by the arch, looking like a fluffy pink cupcake in a truly gigantic dress. When she saw them arrive, she began waving the two of them over to her with a gesture that threatened to knock over the delicate wooden structure behind her.

"Mistah Steel! Mistah Nureyev! Over here!"

They made their way over, Juno struggling all the while not to laugh.

“We see you, Rita.”

Rita was practically jumping up and down. Juno wasn’t sure if the stares they drew were because of Rita or Peter. Her little bounces sent waves of fabric rippling down from her waist, making her look sort of like a jellyfish. “Ooh, I’m excited!” she squealed. “To think, Miss Buddy and Miss Vespa getting *married!* It’s like one of my streams, only better, because it’s real, and I get to wear this fluffy dress, and oh, Mistah Steel, you look so pretty! I mean, you do too, Mistah Nureyev, but you gotta admit Mistah Steel is stealing the show — hah! Get it? Stealing? Because of his name, and also the fact that we’re constantly on the run from the law, on account of all the thieving and burgling?”

Peter chuckled. “I get it, Miss Rita. And yes, he does look rather wonderful, doesn’t he?”

Juno blushed. “Okay, all right. Rita, you look lovely.”

“Aww, Mistah Steel! Ain’t he just the sweetest?”

“Yeah, yeah. Where’s everyone else?”

Rita nodded at the door. “Miss Buddy and Miss Vespa won’t be here until the music starts. I dunno where Mistah Jet ended up, though. I think he’s taking a break before everything starts. They had him in makeup for an hour.”

Juno frowned. “Jet’s wearing makeup?”

“Nah, he said he was gonna scrub it all off before everything started,” said Rita with a grin. “I think he was just humorin’ them. He said otherwise they would’ve been all over me, and he said my makeup was already to die for.”

“How very sweet of him,” said Peter. “I’d be inclined to agree with him. You look absolutely scrumptious.”

“Oh, Mistah Nureyev, you don’t have to,” said Rita.

“Oh, but I’d like to,” he replied.

“Well, in that case, you don’t have to stop, either,” she said, giggling.

People began to file into the room. Jet was among them, and he slid through the crowd to make his way over to the arch with the rest of

them. His suit was white with green lining and accents, and Juno realized suddenly that he had never seen Jet in formal wear before.

“Looking good, big guy,” he said.

Jet nodded. “Thank you, Juno. Where are Buddy and Vespa?”

Rita let out a sudden squeal. “Ooh! Mistah Jet, look, there they are! Oh my gosh, don’t they look lovely?”

Juno turned just in time to see the crowd part to let Buddy and Vespa take their places at the rear of the room. Vespa was wearing an emerald green tux that complimented her newly-dyed and slicked-back green hair. Her bow tie was a bit crooked; she fiddled with it nervously as someone pushed forward and brushed some last-minute makeup under her eyes. Buddy looked regal as hell in her white dress. It was calf-length, with slits that ran nearly all the way up her thighs, revealing green platform boots that reached just above the knee. The dress was sleeveless and high-collared with a keyhole that revealed the barest hints of cleavage. Her long red hair had been swept up into an elegant bun, and, aside from an emerald green eyepatch, her scarred face was bare. Juno grinned; he could only imagine the arguments she’d had to avoid wearing makeup or a more elaborate mask.

“Okay,” someone shouted. “Guests to your marks. We start shooting in two minutes, people. Band, watch for your cue. Rita, Jet, you know what to do.”

Peter placed a hand on Juno’s waist and gently guided him to a place just to the side of the arch. Everyone else followed suit, leaving a narrow aisle leading to the arch. Rita dashed to the end of it and grabbed a basket of flowers from a nearby guest. Jet stood just behind the archway, his hands clasped behind his back in his usual stoic gesture.

“Thirty seconds!”

The guests fell silent. Juno scanned over their faces, craning his neck searching for familiar faces. Cassandra was standing in a corner behind one of the cameras, whispering into her comms; Alessandra was standing near the back, wearing a baby blue gown that matched the eyes of the woman holding her arm, who Juno presumed was her fiance; Ruslan and Khabib were on the opposite side of the arch, standing beside each other and wearing matching dark suits. Other than that, though, Juno didn’t recognize a single guest. He would have

wagered Buddy and Vespa didn't, either.

Peter squeezed Juno's hand, and he turned back around just in time for the band to start playing. He immediately turned back to watch Rita making her way up the aisle, scattering flower petals and beaming like a white dwarf star. She drifted up the aisle on her cloud of a dress before standing off to one side, surreptitiously wiping tears from her eyes.

Next came Buddy and Vespa, arm in arm. They made their way toward the arch with smiles on their faces, gazing at each other the whole time. The music swelled when they reached Jet, and they turned to face each other, hands clasped. With a final flourish, the band fell silent.

Jet nodded to the two of them. "Hello," he said. "Today, we are here to celebrate the wedding of Buddy and Vespa. They have chosen to write their own vows for each other, which they will read in a moment. First, I will make my speech. I am not one for speeches, so I will make this short."

He turned to Buddy. "Buddy Aurinko has saved my life many times. She saved me from myself when I had no control; she saved me from relapse many times. She is an incredible boss. She is a talented thief. She is a fierce leader. She is a wonderful and loyal person. Most importantly, Buddy is my friend. I cannot praise her highly enough.

"Vespa is also my friend," he said, looking at her, "and she has also saved me many times. She has saved herself, which is a very difficult feat. She has endured pain, and she has survived it. She has helped others. She does this because she is a good person. One should not have to endure pain to prove their strength, but Vespa has. She is strong. She is capable. She is the one person to whom I would trust Buddy's safety and heart. I am glad that Buddy has chosen her as a partner.

"The two of you are making a promise today. It is an important promise. You are promising to be with each other. You are promising to protect each other. You are promising to love each other, even when it is hard. These are noble things.

"I have only one thing left to say. I am very happy to see the two of you on your wedding day. I believe you have both earned this joy many times over. I hope you continue to find joy together for as long as you choose."

Jet's eyes were watery, and Rita was weeping openly. Juno sniffled. Beside him, a tear rolled down Peter's cheek. Buddy and Vespa had tears in their eyes, too, which they wiped away as Jet invited them to say their vows.

Buddy began. "Vespa," she said, reaching up and stroking Vespa's cheek. "I love you. You have been my partner for so many years, darling, and I'm so grateful for it. I'm so grateful to be beside you, when I wake up and when I sleep and for every hour in between." Her voice began to break. "I'm so happy to have you again, after I lost you for so long, and I'm so grateful you chose to come back to me. I vow to stay with you as long as you wish, Vespa, and to walk beside you through this part of our lives. I vow to be with you in mind, body, and spirit. I vow to love you every day that we are together and every day that we are apart, for all the time we have together."

Vespa choked down a sob. "Buddy," she said, tears pouring down her face, "I am so happy to be back with you. I missed you *so much.* I don't think I could ever tell you how much I love you. You saved me, Bud. I was lost, and you showed me the way home.

"I'll stay with you, Buddy. As long as you love me, I'll be with you. I'll be by your side. I'll watch your back as long as you watch mine."

Vespa nodded to Jet, who gestured to Rita. She pulled the rings from her pocket and presented them to Buddy and Vespa. They each slipped a ring onto the other's hand, then kissed each other's rings.

"By the power vested in me by the Nureyevist revolution," said Jet, "and also the great state of Indiana, I pronounce you wedded. You may now kiss. Really, you could have kissed at any time, and no one would have stopped you. Thank you for your patience in this matter."

Buddy held Vespa's face gently in her hands and leaned down, brushing her lips against Vespa's. They stayed like that for a moment before Vespa wrapped her arms around Buddy's neck and deepened the kiss. Surrounded by the cheers of the rebels around them, Buddy and Vespa embraced. Juno averted his eyes as they parted and gazed into each other's eyes, feeling like he should give them a moment of privacy, the kind that the revolution had stolen from all of them. When he looked up, Peter was smiling at him.

"Quite the show," he said.

"Yeah," said Juno, his voice raw. "Hell of a distraction."

The band played again, and everyone began to move. The rebels spread throughout the room, several of them grabbing partners or groups with which to dance. The band struck up an old-fashioned tune, and Peter laid one hand on Juno's waist and held Juno's hand with the other.

"Care to dance?" he asked.

Juno stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek. "I could dance," he said.

Blushing, Peter began to lead him through the steps of the old Brahman folk dance that was spreading rapidly through the room. As they twirled, Juno caught a glimpse of Buddy and Vespa, curled next to each other on chairs that had been dragged to the edges of the room. Buddy had leaned forward and rested her forehead against Vespa's. The two of them were talking, caught in their own little world, and Vespa's smile was the biggest Juno had ever seen.

When that dance ended, the band began to play more modern music. Rita and Jet joined them, Rita with enthusiasm and Jet with a near-robotic stiffness. Juno and Rita taught Peter and Jet one of the dances they had done at a hundred clubs dotted across Hyperion City when cases had slowed, and Jet taught them a swing dance from Europa. At the next slow song, Peter grabbed Rita and began to twirl her around the room. Jet reached an arm out to Juno, and Juno led them both in a simplified version of a dance he had learned from Benzaiten — the first dance he had ever learned.

"That was a nice speech you made up there, big guy," said Juno. "I gotta admit, I teared up a little."

"Thank you, Juno," said Jet. "I worked on it for many hours. It was very difficult. I do not like speaking in front of a crowd."

"What, really? Couldn't even tell."

When the song ended, Peter tapped on Jet's shoulder. "Excuse me," he said, "but might I ask the lady for another dance?"

Juno rolled his eyes as Jet stepped politely away. "Jeez," he said. "You're making me feel like some kinda debutante."

"Well, a lady like you deserves the best, Juno, darling."

Peter's hand on his waist was a warm and comforting weight. As they

turned, Peter stroked one thumb absently over Juno's dress. Juno leaned his head on Peter's shoulder, and Peter pressed a kiss to his forehead.

"I really do love you, Juno," he said.

Juno closed his eyes and hummed. He could hear Peter's heartbeat, steady and reassuring, and their gentle swaying lulled him into a sense of comfort that he hadn't felt in weeks. The familiar spice of Peter's cologne washed over him, overpowering the smell of unfamiliar bodies that had permeated the room. Juno played absentmindedly with a lock of hair that was stuck to the back of Peter's neck.

As the hours passed, Juno clung more and more closely to Peter's side. He was swallowed by an old anxiety, one that he felt every time he was in a room like this — packed too closely with quick-moving bodies, swirling in patterns that he couldn't quite follow. Peter had picked up on it quickly and guided them to some of the seats at the edge of the room, where they sat together, Peter's arm over Juno's shoulders, until the cameras turned off. Just as quickly as it had begun, the party ended, with everyone filing out of the hall and back to their rooms.

Before they left, Juno pulled Peter over to the place where Buddy and Vespa had been sitting all evening. Buddy stood and hugged him, which made Juno choke up all over again, and Vespa punched him in the shoulder.

"Congrats, you two," Juno said.

"Thank you, darling," said Buddy. "I'm glad you were here. I suppose it wasn't quite the family affair I would have imagined, but I'm glad we were together, all the same."

Juno nodded. "You deserve it," he said. "You guys deserve this."

Vespa's already-soft expression broke into a small smile. "Thanks, Steel," she said. "For all of this. You too, Nureyev. This wouldn't have happened if it weren't for this rebellion."

"All's fair, eh?" said Peter. "Anyway, we'll be off now. I'm afraid our dear ex-detective has been very patient tonight, and I think he deserves a rest."

Juno rolled his eyes. "I'm not some delicate flower," he said. "I had fun. Really."

Buddy laughed. “I’m sure you did, Juno,” she said. “Still, I know you dislike crowds. Thank you for being here. Thank you both.”

Peter wrapped his arm over Juno’s shoulder again as they made their way back to their room. His fingers traced smooth spirals over Juno’s arm. Juno shivered.

When they finally reached their room, Juno pulled Peter down for a kiss. Peter let out a small, content noise and adjusted the angle until their faces fit smoothly together, then did something with his tongue that never failed to leave Juno gasping. The scent of his cologne mixed with sweat was dizzying, electrifying, and comforting all at once. Juno grabbed at Peter’s belt loops and pulled him closer. Peter let out a small grunt.

Peter pulled back. “Juno,” he said, his voice low and full of desire, and then he cleared his throat. “We, ah, we should probably change out of our clothes.”

Reluctantly, Juno pulled back. Peter kissed him on the cheek before pulling off his jacket and unbuttoning his shirt. Juno sat on the edge of the bed and watched as Peter stripped down to his boxers and removed his jewelry. When he was finished, Peter sat beside Juno and gestured for him to turn. He did, and Peter undid the zipper at the back of his dress, pulling it slowly down towards Juno’s waist. As the cool air hit his back, Juno shivered.

Peter pressed a lazy kiss to the base of Juno’s neck, then another. Juno hummed.

When Peter pulled away, Juno changed as quickly as he could into a tee shirt and shorts. Peter washed off his makeup in the bathroom, and when Juno was changed, he went to do the same. Peter wordlessly grabbed a cloth and began to wipe the makeup off of Juno’s eye. He pulled off Juno’s eye patch and wiped under there too, clearing away the sticky sweat that had gathered under the metallic cloth.

When he was finished, he kissed Juno again. His kisses were sleepy, but they had a dull fire behind them. Juno realized that it had been weeks since the two of them had gone to bed together; with fire in his belly, he pulled Peter back and onto the bed.

Peter paused for a moment and ran his eyes over Juno’s face, something greedy in his gaze. Then, he frowned. “Juno?” he asked.

Juno leaned up to kiss along Peter's jaw. "Yeah?"

Peter took a deep breath. "Would you ever want that?"

"Want what?" asked Juno. He was focusing his attention on a small freckle just under Peter's chin.

"To get married."

Juno froze. The word 'married' had sent a shock of static through his mind, leaving him completely blank. Peter pulled away a bit, concern written all over his face.

"What?" said Juno, breathless.

"I'm sorry," said Peter. "I didn't mean to surprise you. If you'd like to forget I said anything, you may. I certainly won't object to going back to what we were doing."

"Wait," said Juno. "Just give me a second." He pulled himself up until he was sitting with Peter hovering over his lap, face inches from his own. He wrapped his hands around Peter's waist and pulled him down until he was sitting in Juno's lap. Juno rubbed one hand up and down Peter's thigh, his fingertips going numb as they brushed against smooth skin.

"Okay," Peter whispered. He leaned his forehead against Juno's. Juno closed his eyes.

"Are you…?" Juno asked, and then he paused. Heart racing, he cleared his throat. "Are you proposing to me?"

Peter laughed. "In a sense, I suppose," he said. "I'm not asking if you want to be *engaged.* I'm asking if, someday, you would like to be married, both in the abstract sense and, if you'd have it, to me."

"And you would want to marry *me?*"

Peter kissed him softly. "Of course," he said. "Besides, I wouldn't have asked if I didn't."

Juno's mind flitted to an abandoned wedding dress, somewhere on Mars — maybe in the trash, or maybe in his closet, still, or maybe even in someone else's. He thought of all the promises he'd made and broken. He thought of all the promises others had made to him, and all the ones they had broken. He thought of his family on the *Carte*

Blanche, and of the way that Vespa had clung desperately to Buddy when they'd reunited at the lighthouse, and of the way Peter had let himself trust Juno again, even after Juno had left. He thought of what might happen to Peter — of the myriad ways that this revolution could go wrong, or the next heist, or just *life.*

Then, he thought of the quiet mornings they'd had on the *Carte Blanche.* He thought of a future of cooking breakfast for the two of them, Peter's hands at his waist. He imagined them finding a small, cozy house somewhere, of painting the rooms, of a garden of roses out back. He thought about days spent in quiet company together and of nights spent snuggled together on a couch for a stream marathon. He imagined coffee dates and peaceful evenings and the sorts of problems that regular people probably had, instead of war and violence and fear. It had taken Juno almost forty years to be able to imagine a future for himself at all, and he was still almost uncomfortable with the idea, but a future with Peter Nureyev? It didn't even seem like a question.

"Okay," Juno whispered. "Yes. I'd like that. But not, you know, the whole big wedding with the dress and the ceremony and the people. Just something quiet." He laughed. "I'd say a courthouse wedding, but I don't think we can just stroll into a courthouse and ask for a marriage license for the galaxy's most infamous terrorist and his accomplice."

Peter kissed him. "You know," he said, "if you don't want the ceremony, we could do it now."

Juno's eyes flew open. "What?"

Peter was grinning. "As you know, I have quite the jewelry collection. If you'd like rings, I have them. And if we aren't having a ceremony, or going to a courthouse, we may as well do it here."

"Like, right now?"

"Only if you'd like to, of course," said Peter. "But I'll be honest with you, Juno, darling: I'd like to be married to you as soon as possible." He kissed Juno again. When he pulled back, he was still smiling, but something in it had softened. "It is, in fact, the one thing I want in all the galaxy."

Juno blinked away tears. "Okay," he said. His voice was hoarse. "Yeah. Let's do it."

Peter stood and went to rummage in his suitcase. It only took him a second to find two rings, a gold band and a silver ring with a teardrop sapphire. He handed the latter to Juno and grabbed Juno's hands, sitting next to him on the bed.

"So we just… go?" asked Juno.

"I suppose," said Peter. "I can go first, if you'd like time to think of your vows."

Juno raised an eyebrow. "This is all feeling suspiciously planned-out."

Peter shrugged. "First rule of thieving: Always be prepared."

"I thought it was 'Don't set off the alarms.'"

"First rule of thieving: Never question the first rule of thieving."

Juno laughed. "Okay, fine. You go first, then."

Peter cleared his throat. When he met Juno's eyes, his gaze was filled with soft intensity.

"Juno Steel," he said, "when I met you, I was as lost as I was nameless. I thought I had direction and purpose, but it was never more than a plan for the next heist, the next burglary, the next place where I could find enough to keep myself alive for just a little longer. I hardly knew who I was. 'Peter Nureyev' hadn't existed for twenty years, and each persona I crafted ate away from him bit by bit until almost nothing remained.

"And then I met you, Juno. I met you, and suddenly all I wanted was to be everything you needed. I created personas to tempt you; I showed off; I was, I must admit, a bit overzealous, looking back."

Juno snorted. "A bit?"

"Hush," said Peter, silencing Juno with a kiss. "Anyway, it wasn't until we were trapped in that awful tomb together, and I was Peter Nureyev because I didn't have the energy to be anything else, that I realized he might just be enough for you to love him."

Juno softened. "Of course," he said. "Of course you're enough."

Peter kissed him. "I feel so privileged," he said, "to be part of your life. To have seen all the anger and outrage in you, and also all the kindness, and the pain, and the love for the people around you. To

even catch a glimpse is a treasure; for you to have invited me into your heart is almost more than I can bear, and certainly more than anyone can ever deserve."

"Nureyev," said Juno, his voice breaking.

"I love you, Juno. I'd like to be with you for the rest of my life, if you'll have me."

"Of course I will, Nureyev. Of course I will."

Peter smiled. "Okay," he said. "Your turn."

Juno let out a chuckle as he brushed away a tear that had slipped down his cheek. "Uh, okay," he said. "I don't really know how to follow that."

Peter squeezed his hand. "That's all right, darling," he said. "Whatever you have to say will be wonderful, because it will be yours."

Juno took a deep breath. "Okay," he said. "Okay. Peter Nureyev. I remember not understanding how much of a gift that was when you gave it to me. You gave me your name, and your trust, and even your heart, and I don't know how it took me so long to really get it, you know? To get how big that was for you. I guess because understanding was the big thing for me.

"My first instinct is always to run away. I think it's yours, too, which is why I know how hard it is to tie yourself to me like this. I know because it's hard for me, too, to feel like I'm tied to someone like that. It's terrifying, but it's also grounding, right? Because for so long, I was just drifting, too. I was taking cases and drinking to forget them and pushing everyone away because being happy wasn't something I thought I deserved.

"It took meeting someone like you to make me think that maybe I deserved to get better. If you looked at me and saw someone worth saving, saw someone worth loving, then maybe I could do it, too. And I think it was important that I did it for me, but you're the one who made me realize that I had been sitting in this deep dark hole for twenty years, and that all I had to do was decide I wanted to get out. You made me want to get out. And yeah, getting out was hard, but before you, I barely saw it as an option.

"And I'm so *happy* with you, Nureyev. I mean, you just make me so damn happy. I feel like I can't even hold it inside myself, like my body

couldn't hold that kind of love, and the only way to hold it is to share it with you. It's the best feeling in the world. I didn't know I could love somebody like that. I didn't know I could be loved like that."

Peter's eyes had filled with tears, so Juno reached up and ran his thumb along Peter's cheekbone, his fingers trembling. "I love you, Peter Nureyev," he said. "I love you like I never loved anyone before. I want to be with you tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that, and every day until we're both old and wrinkled — well, okay, old*er* and *more* wrinkled - "

"Speak for yourself."

"— and we — stop *laughing,* Nureyev, jeez — and we just die in each other's arms, but not in the crazy dramatic adventurous way where we go out, guns blazing, embracing at the end of the world. I just want us to get the kind of life that they talk about in streams. I want us to get the kind of life that old people won't shut up about. I want that with you. I never thought I'd want that until I wanted it with you."

"Oh, Juno," said Peter, laughing breathlessly as tears finally poured down his cheeks.

"I love you," said Juno, and it occurred to him that he'd said that so many times in the last few minutes, and that he'd never said it before now — that, in that evening, he'd said "I love you" more times than he ever had in his life.

"I love you," he said again, for good measure, "and I'm not gonna stop, and I'm not gonna leave, and I'm never, ever going to forget it. I promise. I vow. Whatever you're supposed to say at a wedding. I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere."

He paused to wipe the tears from Peter's cheeks and laughed. "So, uh, do we get to kiss now?"

"We can do whatever we want, dear. It's our own damn wedding."

Juno laughed and leaned forward. Their kiss was warm and familiar, their lips slotting into place like it was all instinct. Peter slid the gold band onto Juno's finger, and Juno slid the sapphire ring onto Peter's. They laughed against each others' lips, wrapping their arms around each other and holding on tight.

"Now," said Juno, "if I'm remembering correctly, we were in the middle of something."

“Oh, yes,” said Peter, and pulled Juno down beside him, laughing all the while.

Later, when Peter was resting his head against Juno’s chest, Juno frowned.

“So, what are we doing about names, then?” he said.

“Well,” said Peter, fiddling with Juno’s ring where their fingers met, “I’ve thought about it, and I think I should take your name, if it’s all right with you.”

“Yeah, that’s ‘all right’ with me,” said Juno. “Can I ask why?”

Peter let out a soft sigh and turned so that his face was pressed into Juno’s chest. “I suppose it’s because ‘Peter Nureyev’ isn’t just my name anymore,” he said. “It belongs to the people of Brahma, now. I think it always did, in a way, but now it feels less like something I own and protect and share at my own discretion and more like a symbol of something so large I cannot possibly control it. Besides, I’ve always liked choosing my name, and choosing to share yours feels like an answer to a question I never quite knew I could ask. ‘Peter Nureyev’ may belong to the people, but ‘Peter Steel’ can be ours.”

Juno hummed. “Peter Steel,” he said. “I like it. Rolls off the tongue. Plus, lots of opportunities for puns.”

Peter groaned. “Certainly not.”

“Hey, if you wanna be a thief with the last name ‘Steel,’ be my guest. I’m just saying it opens you up to a lot of dumb jokes. I would know.”

Peter pressed a kiss to his chest. “Impossible,” he muttered.

"It's still cool if I call you Nureyev, though, right?"

"Certainly," said Peter. "I don't know how I would feel if you started calling me 'Steel.' I do love your name, Juno, but I think I'm more the multi-syllabic type, in public."

Juno laughed. He wrapped his arm over Peter’s shoulders and squeezed, holding him as close as possible. He closed his eyes and

listened as Peter’s breathing evened out before letting himself begin to fall into a deep sleep.

His last thought before letting go of consciousness was that he wanted to live inside that moment forever.

[image]

Chapter End Notes

Art by noir-martian (on Tumblr) aka @random_jocelyn (on twitter)

Beta'd by looking-for-destroya (bigmcworm on ao3)

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In which Juno is warned

Chapter Summary

“No, look, Rita, it’s not what you -”

“And besides, we gotta get ready for the mission! What would Miss Buddy think if she found you two getting busy in the kitchen -”

“Rita, jeez, it wasn’t that bad -”

“- and here I am, just trying to clean up, boss, because I know you were all looking for the mugs, and I’m sorry for keeping ‘em all in my room, but really, if this is the kinda stuff going on in here then maybe I don’t wanna wash my dishes -”

“As if you were gonna wash them anyway -”

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: Mentions of injury/illness, death mention

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Juno awoke the next morning to find that Peter had rolled off of him in the night. He now lay beside Juno, a curl of hair falling over his forehead. Juno pushed it back and kissed the spot where it had been, and Peter’s eyes flooded open.

“Hey there, Mr. Steel,” he said, and Peter smiled.

“Hmm,” he said. “And how did my darling wife sleep?”

“Better than I have in weeks,” said Juno. “Guess the dancing really took it out of me.”

“Really? The dancing? *Just* the dancing?”

“Well,” said Juno, “unless you can think of anything else it could have been…”

Peter pulled him in for a kiss, but they were interrupted by a knock at the door. Within minutes, they were scrambling to get dressed for yet another strategy meeting.

Their day was pure chaos: the strategy meeting was followed by

another day filming propaganda pieces with Cassandra, whom Juno avoided by chatting with Castor and Pollux in between takes. Peter spent dinner training with Alessandra, so Juno was left to eat with Rita, Jet, and Vespa in the sprawling dining hall. Juno spent about an hour shooting with Jet before heading to bed, and he was asleep before Peter could join him.

The following weeks were mostly the same. They were lucky enough to wake up together, for the most part, but their days were spent in a whirlwind of activity. Intercepting the mineral shipment had been a huge success, but it had painted an even larger target on their back. The base was cleared out, and the Aurinko crime family returned to the *Carte Blanche,* but their schedules were still determined by the Nureyevist leadership. Every time a free hour popped up, it was filled with some stupid meeting or training session or *something* until Juno was ready to explode.

On one such occasion, when Juno and Peter had finally crept off to their room together without anyone stopping them along the way only to be interrupted by a comms call from Khabib, Juno snapped. As Peter pulled his pants back on, Juno ranted for ten minutes about how "we can't even get a second to *think,* much less see each other for longer than five minutes, and now they want you *again,* Peter, this is *ridiculous* -"

Juno was barely getting any sleep, and the running around was leaving him exhausted and sick. He slept for thirteen hours one weekend and got chewed out by Vespa for missing a meeting, then for not coming to see him when he was so clearly not feeling well. He just nodded his way through her tirade, his back aching from the shitty bench she'd shoved him onto, and promised he'd come see her if he wasn't feeling better in a week. He then followed Peter to yet another meeting, where he was ignored as people spoke for three hours about their visions of a bold new future. All Juno wanted was to curl back up and fall asleep.

After about six weeks back on the *Carte Blanche,* Buddy called them all into the kitchen for a family meeting. Bleary-eyed, Juno stumbled past the kitchen table and headed straight for a cup of coffee, still in his pajamas. Peter, on the other hand, was sitting at the table with perfect posture, his hair styled and his outfit immaculate. Juno plopped down next to him and rested his head on Peter's shoulder. Peter kissed him on the forehead.

Vespa snapped her fingers in Juno's face as she passed. "Look alive,

Steel," she said.

Juno groaned.

"All right," said Buddy. "We're going to another base."

Everyone groaned.

"Hush," Buddy snapped. "Now, listen. We'll be landing on the surface of one of Vishnu's smaller moons in about three hours. We're to touch down and rendezvous with the others at their makeshift hospital to get footage for another propaganda reel. Peter, darling, you and I are to make our way among the wounded and raise morale. You know the drill."

Peter smiled. "Of course."

Juno cleared his throat. "So Vespa and I will be with you, right?"

Buddy nodded. "Certainly, darling. We couldn't do it without you."

"Not on camera, though," said Vespa.

"No, not on camera, dear," Buddy said. She covered Vespa's hand with her own and gave it a brief squeeze. "We're to meet with the people who have been leading the charge on Vishnu. Ruslan has informed me that we're to speak in particular with a man named 'Hermes,' who has been instrumental in getting the hospital running. This is, apparently, going to be a large part of the film; I suppose Hermes is quite the figure on Vishnu, about as famous there as Peter is on Brahma."

"Wait, Hermes?" Juno asked. "Like, the guy who was dealing with the Board of Fresh Starts? The guy whose office *started* this whole mess? *That* Hermes?

"As far as I can tell, yes," she explained. "I've been informed that he was a spy for the Nureyevist movement all along, and that his work with the Board mostly involved funneling money away from them and into the pockets of the rebels. From what Ruslan says, he's something of a genius - a brilliant strategist, and quite the inventor. She says he mostly speaks through an agent, which may be why he hasn't risen to quite the level of fame that our Peter has."

Juno crossed his arms and let out a *hmph,* but he stopped protesting as Buddy outlined the rest of their mission. The details were boring enough that he eventually let himself zone out, nearly falling asleep

with his head in his hands. He only snapped back to awareness when he realized that the others had mostly left, aside from Peter, who was shaking his shoulder gently.

“Hmm?” he said. “Oh, yeah. Okay. Right. I’m ready to go.”

“Juno, darling,” said Peter softly, “you’re in pajamas.”

“Oh. Right. Well, I”ll go get dressed, and then I’ll be ready.”

Peter frowned. “Are you sure you’re all right, Juno? If you’re not feeling up to it—”

“No, no, I’m fine,” said Juno, waving him off. “Just need another cup of coffee. You go get ready. I’ll catch up to you soon.”

“Are you sure?”

Juno smiled and kissed him on the cheek. “I”m sure, honey,” he said. “Don’t worry about me.”

Peter grinned and kissed him. His lips were dry, the way they always were in the morning, and his breath tasted like black tea and sugar. Juno rested one hand on Peter’s waist as they kissed and ran his thumb along the solid line of his pelvis. Peter’s breath hitched.

“Juno,” he whispered.

“AGH!” screamed Rita.

The two of them jumped apart to see Rita in the doorway, blushing furiously. She was holding six dirty mugs, each of which looked like it was full of the crusted remains of hot chocolate and salmon dust, which Juno didn’t want to think about.

“Rita!” Juno shouted.

“Sorry, boss,” she moaned. “I didn’t know you two were gonna be doing that in the kitchen, but to be fair, you gotta take that kinda stuff to the bedroom! I don’t wanna see you two getting all hot and heavy in here. I *eat* in here!”

“No, look, Rita, it’s not what you—”

“And besides, we gotta get ready for the mission! What would Miss Buddy think if she found you two *getting busy* in the kitchen—”

“Rita, jeez, it wasn’t that bad—”

“— and here I am, just trying to clean up, boss, because I know you were all looking for the mugs, and I’m sorry for keeping ‘em all in my room, but really, if this is the kinda stuff going on in here then maybe I *don’t* wanna wash my dishes—”

“As if you were gonna wash them *anyway*—”

“Rita,” said Peter, “I was just leaving.” He smoothed his hair back, half-embarrassed, and smiled at Juno. “I’ll see you soon, Juno, dear,” he said, before pressing one last kiss to Juno’s cheek and sweeping out of the room.

Juno glared at Rita. “Thanks for that,” he said.

Rita dumped her armful of mugs into the sink. “I mean, c’mon, boss,” she said, glancing Juno’s way, “we’ve got stuff to do today! No time to get busy with your husba— I MEAN BOYFRIEND — I MEAN—”

Juno choked. “Rita,” he said in a strained voice, “what did you just say?”

Rita winced. “Sorry, boss,” she said, fiddling with the bright pink scrunchie wrapped around her wrist. “I know you didn’t say nothin’ to the rest of the crew, and I didn’t mean to notice, but you never wear rings, and Mistah Nureyev never wears the *same* ring more than once in a row, and the two of you kept sneaking off like kids in the middle of family movie night, and you know the wall’s awful thin and Jet said you were doing your poetry thing again, and I just figured…”

Juno sighed. “Yeah,” he said. “Okay. We got married.”

Rita squealed. “Oh, Mistah Steel!” she said, wrapping him in a suffocating hug. “Oh, I’m so happy for you! And you seem so happy, boss, and I ain’t never seen you happy like this before, except maybe right after the two of you got back together, and even when you’re grumpy it’s like a *happy* grumpy, y’know?”

“I don’t,” Juno mumbled.

“Well, I do,” said Rita. “And I just think it’s real sweet, the two of you getting married like that, all secret. It’s like something out of a stream. And I think the two of you might be real soulmates, like in *Stealing Hearts* — OOH, except maybe for you two it’s STEEL-ing hearts, get it? Because you’re—”

Juno laughed, even as he struggled in Rita's surprisingly strong grasp. "Yeah, Rita, I get it," he said. "Now can you please let me go? I can't breathe."

"Oops!" she said. She loosened her grip, but didn't let go. "Sorry. Didn't realize. Anyway, I'm real happy for you."

Juno smiled. "You, know," he said, "I'm real happy, too. Feels like even if everything else is a mess, at least this one thing is good. Like I finally get something nice, and so does he. I think we deserve it, after everything."

Rita kissed him on the cheek. "You do, Mistah Steel," she said. "You both do. Now, c'mon, we gotta get ready for the base." She turned and pulled him out of the kitchen, leaving her unwashed mugs behind.

They arrived at the base in the early afternoon. They all piled into the not-RUBY 7, since it was big enough for all of them, and Jet piloted them down to the surface. It wasn't the smallest moon Juno had ever seen, but it was small enough that its orbit was highly irregular, since it was pulled by Vishnu's four other moons into a strange but somehow stable orbit that left it with days and nights that could last anywhere from an hour to three days. The rebel base wasn't affected by that, though, since it was built the same way the first one had been: no windows, just harsh fluorescent lights that gave Juno a headache within five minutes of arriving.

"Can't say I'm excited to be back in one of these," he said.

Jet nodded. "It was very refreshing to be back aboard the *Carte Blanche,*" he said. "I will miss it while we are here."

"Not to worry," said Buddy. "We're only here overnight. We'll be back on board the ship in no time. Besides, we're here for a mission, not for pleasure."

"Doesn't mean I have to like it," Juno grumbled.

Khabib came to meet them and to guide them back to the hospital wing, their mouth shut in a grim line the whole way. As they walked, Cassandra, Castor, and Pollux joined them, cameras at the ready.

The hospital wing was more crowded than Juno had expected. Clearly, the revolution on Vishnu had been a lot bloodier than the one on Brahma, at least as far as Juno had seen; either that, or the wounded were more concentrated here. Either way, the wing had at

least a hundred makeshift beds, all full with people covered in bandages. It was clean, or at least it looked clean, but the scent of sweat and bodies and illness sent a wave of nausea through Juno's stomach. To keep his mind off the smell, Juno let his gaze sweep over the room, taking in machines and mourners until it fell on a particularly tall man at the back of the room, gesticulating wildly to a smaller person who was nodding earnestly. Juno almost choked.

"*Mick?*"

The man glanced up at the mention of his name, and sure enough, Mick Mercury was standing there, wearing the same dark uniform as most of the revolution leaders. His face broke out in a dopey grin, and he made his way over, arms open.

"Jay-Jay!" he shouted, throwing his arms around Juno. Juno grunted. "Didn't think I'd see you here!"

"Me?" Juno said, belligerent and muffled against Mick's shirt. "I'm here with Nureyev. What the hell are *you* doing here?"

Mick released him. "You know, it's a funny story. There I was, facing down six Dark Matters agents back in Oldtown, when all of a sudden…"

His story faded into the background as Juno took him in. His long dreads, usually hanging around his face, had been tied back. He was clean-shaven for once, and he was standing taller than Juno had ever seen him. He'd built up some muscle, too, a far cry from his old noodle-like build, and even as he rambled, he had a weirdly commanding presence. It was hard to look away from him. Granted, that had always been true, but in the old days that had been because Juno was too preoccupied with making sure Mick didn't hurt himself to look anywhere else. Two years apart had done something strange to Mick — it wasn't quite the unnerving calm of the THEIA, but he had settled somehow, in a thousand little ways. Juno wasn't really sure how to react.

"... and once the Sewer Rabbit Revolution was over, I found these guys! And it seemed like they were really struggling, Jay-Jay, and I wanted to do something good with my life, you know? So I joined up, and Sasha said she'd stay, too—"

"Wait, wait, wait," said Juno. "*Sasha's* here?"

"Oh, yeah. She said she didn't want me getting myself killed. Fun,

right? Hey, Jay-Jay, we could get the old gang back together! It'd be just like old times, except we'd be almost-dying for a good reason this time, instead of just getting almost-killed by Mr. Nicholas."

"... Okay, yeah, I've just decided that I hate this, actually."

Mick finally glanced at the others. "Oh, wait a second. You guys are the ones I'm supposed to be meeting with! Hey, Jay-Jay, how come you know Peter Nureyev?"

Rita frowned. "Mistah Mercury," she said, "are *you* Hermes?"

Mick laughed. "Pretty smart, huh? I guess 'Mercury' is some ancient Earth god. Hermes is, like, another version of him. I found it in some old stream. Sasha said we should have code names. Oh, oops. Guess I shouldn't be calling her 'Sasha.' She'd probably be pretty mad at me. She told me I should call her 'Athena.' Still don't understand why. Good thing she only listens in on my conversations when she's bored! Actually, she says she does it if she has to fake a headache to get out of something. I don't really get why, but whatever. She's probably too busy to listen right now."

"So you're not just part of the rebellion," said Juno. "You're one of the *leaders?*"

"Well, they just liked my ideas so much, they asked me to be in charge. Crazy, right? To think, good old Mick, King of the Highway, and One-Ball Steel—"

"Nope."

"— are gonna save the day again!"

Cassandra cleared her throat. "If we're all done with the touching reunions," she said, "can we maybe get some footage? You know, the thing we're actually here to do?"

Mick laughed and grabbed Juno's hand, clasping it and shaking it with both hands. "Of course," he said. "Just had to say 'hi' to my good buddy. Oh, and congrats."

"Congrats for what?" asked Vespa.

"For getting married, of course!" he said. "Man, it's crazy how time flies. How long have you been hitched? I like the ring. It suits you!"

The others gaped at Juno and Peter, and Juno felt blood rising to his face. “Uhh, about a month and a half,” he said.

There was a moment of silence, and then the others’ voices were overlapping with joy and annoyance.

“Why didn’t you idiots say anything?” Vespa asked, while Buddy clapped Peter on the arm and offered him congratulations, and Jet said solemnly how proud he was for the two of them, and Rita squealed out her joy to Mick.

“Can we PLEASE get going?” Cassandra growled. “We don’t have all day, here, people.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay,” said Mick. “If you’ll all follow me.”

He led them on a short tour of the medical bay. Cassandra took footage of him guiding them through their equipment, then led Peter and Buddy over to a family near the corner to shoot some interviews with various rebels. Juno and the others hung back, quiet, by an empty bed near the back of the room. Juno was bored within about half a second, so he started glancing at the various patients around the edges of the wing, careful not to let his gaze linger for too long.

A row over, a woman was sitting on another empty bed. Her arm was in a sling, and her eye had been blackened. She looked about five years younger than Juno, and something in her expression made his stomach turn — a kind of depthless despair, so hungry and awful that Juno couldn’t help but stare. She glanced up at him as he did so, and the emptiness behind her eyes was so much that Juno found himself wandering away from the others. He walked up to her and sat down, his body on autopilot.

“Hi,” he said. The bed was uncomfortably firm. The woman’s hands were shaking. “I’m Juno,” he said.

The woman kept her eyes locked with his. “I’m Marya,” she said. “Hello.”

Juno took a deep breath. “Hey, Marya,” he said. “Is it okay if I sit with you?”

She shrugged. “You’re already sitting,” she said.

“If I stay, then.”

“It’s all right,” Marya said. “You can stay. Everyone else is too afraid to talk to me.”

“Why’s that?” Juno asked.

Marya laughed bitterly. “They don’t know what to say. They don’t know how to help, so they don’t try.”

“To help with what?”

She took a desperate gulp of air. “My husband,” she said, like the words had been punched out of her. “He’s dead. He died yesterday.”

Juno nodded and let his eye drift from hers. Silence stretched out between them. In the corner, Peter was laughing with a young person who was missing a hand. Cassandra’s camera was right up in their faces, but the laughter seemed genuine. It echoed in Juno’s head as he processed Marya’s words.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Juno, after a pause. “I guess I don’t know how to help, either. Is there anything…?”

Marya shook her head. “He was leading a mission into the Kinshasan embassy, down on the surface. Routine surveillance mission. He was captured. They were all captured. They were executed today. I keep thinking he’s gonna walk back in that door any second, come visit me in here. He won’t.”

Juno offered his hand to her, palm up. She took it. The strength of her grip was painful, but Juno didn’t let go.

“Tomorrow’s our anniversary,” she said. “Five years. Marrying him was the best decision I ever made.”

“Yeah,” said Juno. “I know what you mean.”

“And now he’s gone,” she gasped. “And I’ll never see him again, and it’s not okay. I’m gonna kill those bastards.”

Juno glanced at her. Behind her anger and pain, there was still that emptiness, like a grief she couldn’t let herself understand yet. He squeezed her hand. “Think you’d better heal up, first,” he said. “Can’t fight with a broken arm.”

Marya nodded. “I know,” she said. “I know. Look, you’re with that Nureyev guy, right?”

“Yeah,” Juno said. “I— I'm his wife.”

Marya met his gaze. “Keep him safe,” she said quietly. “Don’t lose him. You don’t want this.”

“I know,” said Juno. “I’m terrified of it.”

And he was. He had caught so many glimpses of this fear — of Peter, lost or locked away or killed, and of himself stuck and unable to do anything to help, *useless*. To see this woman, her grief as fresh as it was, was the worst thing he could possibly imagine.

“Okay,” she said. “As long as you understand.”

Juno nodded. They sat in silence again, watching Peter make his way through the rows of sick and injured fighters. There was a fire behind his eyes and an openness to his face. Three months ago, Juno wouldn’t have been able to imagine Peter being that vulnerable — being Peter Nureyev — around complete strangers like this. Now, it was daily life, one of the thousands of strange things that had become routine.

When Cassandra was satisfied with their footage, Mick beckoned to all of them to follow him out of the medical wing. Juno glanced at Marya, and she grabbed for his arm.

“Wait,” she gasped, so Juno stopped.

“Yeah?”

She gulped down another breath. “Don’t forget,” she said. “Don’t forget me. They sent him out there to die. It has to end. Please.”

Juno’s mind, unbidden, went to Ruslan - the way she handed out orders so coolly, even as people came back injured or didn’t come back at all. He thought of Vespa’s desperation when they had searched for Buddy. He glanced back at Peter.

“I won’t forget,” he promised.

Marya let him go, and he jogged over to the others, unnerved. As they made their way out of the wing, Juno snaked an arm around Peter’s waist and held on tight.

“Made a new friend?” Peter asked, grinning.

Juno shrugged. “Something like that,” he said, and allowed himself to be led away from the lonely widow behind him.

“Ruslan’s got another mission for us,” said Peter. “A ball for the political elites on Vishnu. We’re to create another distraction. I believe we’re taking hostages.”

“Great,” said Juno, his voice flat. As they left the hospital, Juno kept hold of Peter and refused to let go.

[image]

Chapter End Notes

Art by noir-martian (on Tumblr) aka @random_jocelyn (on twitter)

Beta'd by looking-for-destroya (bigmcworm on ao3)

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In which Juno and Peter attend a party

Chapter Summary

> *“Any second now,” Peter muttered.*
>
> *Juno pressed a quick kiss to his cheek. “Break a leg, honey.”*
>
> *“You too,” Peter whispered.*

Chapter Notes

> Content warnings: Violence, blood and injury, guns, mentions of past abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Juno tugged on his dress, pulling it forward so that the slit that ran up his thigh didn’t migrate to his front. Beside him, Peter adjusted his mask, made of raven feathers that stretched down his cheeks and curved around to cradle his cheekbones. Juno had thought his experience with eye patches would prepare him for a masquerade ball, but he had to hold his hands behind his back to keep from itching underneath and revealing his face to the milling crowd of New Kinshasan socialites.

“How much longer do we have to keep these things on?” he grumbled.

Peter checked his pocket watch. “Oh, just a few more minutes,” he said. “Rita and Jet should finish hacking into the system in about half an hour, and Ruslan’s just signaled to let us know she’s in position.”

Peter had sneaked a comms unit into his outfit with a more elaborate ear cuff than his usual one. Juno, on the other hand, had been instructed to stay close to him, as he had no comms unit of his own. Sasha and Mick were up on the balcony that ringed the dance hall, and Juno let his gaze flick up to the two of them before he brought his eyes back down to the swirling room of dancers.

“Good,” said Juno. “Damn, this thing itches.”

“You just need to hold out a bit longer, Juno, dear,” said Peter. “Would you like me to distract you?”

Juno grinned and ran a hand down Peter’s back. “Distract me? What

do you have in mind?"

Peter glanced down at him and laughed. "Not like that, darling. Would you like to dance?"

"Just dancing?"

"Just dancing," Peter said. "We need to be on the alert, dear."

"Yeah, in ten minutes. We've got time."

Peter grabbed Juno by the arm and swung him out onto the dance floor. This was nothing like the carefree and intimate dance they had shared at Buddy and Vespa's wedding, but it was everything like the dance they had shared on that first day as part of the Aurinko crime family — tense, with every move calculated to the breath. They had gotten good at this kind of intimacy, too, after more than a year of heisting together; they arranged themselves the way they always did when they danced, with Juno leading Peter, both of them arranged so they could watch each others' backs.

Peter leaned in close enough that his breath shifted the hair above Juno's ears. "Buddy's just sent the signal to block external communications. From here on out, we're on our own, aside from the event's video feed."

Juno nodded. "Security at your five," he muttered. "There's two of them disguised as guests. They're dancing."

"What a coincidence," said Peter.

"It's good cover," said Juno. "Especially with the masks."

"Have they noticed us?"

"Don't think so. Dip me?"

Peter smirked. "I thought you'd never ask."

They twirled around each other, each keeping their eyes peeled for problems. Within a couple of minutes, they had maneuvered themselves into position, only a couple of steps away from a famous politician and his husband. Ruslan and Khabib were deep in conversation with another politician and her sibling, and they weren't alone; across the room, Nureyevists were falling into conversation with whichever influential billionaires they could find.

“Any second now,” Peter muttered.

Juno pressed a quick kiss to his cheek. “Break a leg, honey.”

“You too,” Peter whispered. Then he released his hold on Juno, shoving the both of them towards the politician.

Juno pulled his blaster from his thigh holster and pressed it to the husband’s forehead, wrapping his other arm around the man to hold him in place. Peter did the same with the politician, and the rest of the Nureyevists followed, with several of them screaming for everyone to freeze. The music faltered and then came to a stop as the conductor turned and shouted in surprise.

“Nobody move!” Ruslan shouted. “Stay still and nobody gets hurt.”

The security teams, outmaneuvered and outgunned, stood by, speechless, as Peter and Ruslan removed their masks. Every camera in the room swiveled in Peter’s direction. Juno kept a firm hold on the politician’s husband.

“Hello,” said Peter, smiling at one of the cameras. “It appears we have an audience. What fun!”

Ruslan signaled to one of the camera operators. They crept closer, their hands shaking as they approached.

“Let us be clear,” she said. “We mean no harm to anyone working at this event. In fact, we don’t mean any harm towards the guests, either; if everyone follows our directions, no one will be injured or killed in this room tonight.

“Our demands are simple,” she continued. “The people of this system demand freedom from New Kinshasa’s tyranny. We’re here to show you the power of the Nureyevists. *Freedom to*—”

Mid-exclamation, a shot of laser fire rang out across the room, and Ruslan fell, and everything turned to chaos.

Juno shoved his captive away and down, below the lines of laser fire that criss-crossed the room. His own laser was set to stun — sure, every guest at the party was an evil capitalist or corrupt politician, but Juno’s views on killing hadn’t changed since he’d boarded the *Carte Blanche*. He swept his blaster in a wide arc around him, his eyes darting amongst the crowd.

Who's a threat, and who's a friend?

There was a thud at his back, and he heard Sasha's voice, hoarse above the laser fire, shouting "I've got you! Where's backup?"

"There's no backup," Juno yelled back. "Just us!"

Sasha fired twice, her arm hitting Juno's with the recoil. "Exciting," she yelled, and Juno could imagine her face, cool as stone, with only the corner of her mouth flicking up to betray any emotion at all. "It's always a fight with you, huh, Juno?"

Rather than responding, Juno scanned the crowd again, and his gaze narrowed onto a tall man who was approaching Peter from behind. Peter, caught in a knife fight with another security guard, was holding his own, but his focus was all on the fight; he didn't hear Juno's shout of warning, or the sound of Juno's laser fire, which passed behind him and toward his assailant. It missed, Juno noted with frustration, but it was close enough to graze the man's arm, halting him in his tracks. It bought Juno just enough time to sprint forward, hiking his skirt up as he went, and leap onto the man before he could reach Peter.

They went down hard, the jolt traveling through the man's body and rattling Juno's teeth. The man was strong, and he very quickly maneuvered himself so that Juno was beneath him, knocking his gun out of his hand in the process. He sent his first blow down into Juno's cheek, missing Juno's nose by less than an inch and sending an explosion of pain up through his eye socket. Juno returned the favor with a well-timed punch to the man's jaw that knocked him just off-balance. Juno used the momentum to flip the man off of him and scrambled to his feet, keeping low to avoid errant laser fire. The man rolled to a crouch and reached into his pocket. Juno leapt at him again, just in time to grab his arm as he withdrew a plasma knife. The two wrestled for a moment, Juno holding him off with all his strength, before Juno managed to bring his knee up to the man's crotch. The man stumbled back and Juno tackled him. He punched the man before he could react and scrambled for the hand holding the plasma knife, pinning it to the ground and prying the knife from the man's fingers. The man clawed at his face and left a long gash under Juno's mask. Juno threw the knife as far from the two of them as he could before pinning the man's other hand over his head. Holding both of the man's arms down with one hand, he reached down the front of his dress for his smaller blaster.

The man snarled. "Who the hell do you think you are, anyway?"

Juno pulled the blaster out and pressed it to the man's temple. The man's eyes went wide with fear. It was set to stun, but, Juno figured, this guy didn't need to know that. He smirked.

"I'm his *fucking* wife," he said, and pulled the trigger.

The man fell limp. Juno let out a small huff of relief before feeling a slender hand grip his left arm around the bicep. He spun to face his attacker, blaster raised, but it was Peter, his face spattered with blood. He gave Juno a grin that looked more like a grimace as he pulled him to his feet.

"Where to?" Juno asked.

Peter jerked his head toward the stairs at the back of the hall. "It's a bit quieter over there," he muttered. "Might be a nice place for a chat." He clutched at Juno's arm with an iron grip.

Juno nodded. He wrapped his hands around his blaster. "Okay," he said. "Go. I've got you covered."

They dashed toward the stairs. Juno kept the bodyguards at bay with his laser fire. He hit more of them than he missed, but few of his shots were well-aimed enough to keep them down for long. He and Peter ducked as they returned fire, their aim about the same as Juno's. Peter had to let go of his arm to avoid the laser fire, and somewhere in the chaos Juno realized another person was aiming directly at Peter's throat.

"Look out!" Juno shouted, tackling Peter to the ground.

The shot missed and ricocheted off of a metal sculpture behind them. The shooter climbed over another body and lined up another shot, but not before Juno was able to fire off a laser, hitting xem in the chest with a stun shot. Xe fell to the floor.

Juno nodded toward the stairs. "Go!" he shouted, and Peter scrambled to his feet.

When they'd escaped the heaviest fire, Juno grabbed Peter's arm and began to pull him toward a small alcove. Peter let out a quiet noise, half-bitten off, and Juno glanced back at him with concern.

"You okay?" he asked.

Peter nodded, but his face was pale. "It's nothing," he said.

Juno frowned. “Are you sure?”

Peter gave him a small smile. “I’m all right,” he said. “We should find a place to hide.”

"Sounds like a plan."

A sudden burst of laser fire spurred Peter into shoving Juno forward. They dashed toward a set of golden doors and shoved them open, bursting out into the night air. The balcony they’d stumbled onto was bare, so Juno shoved the doors closed and braced himself against them. Peter did the same, leaning close enough to Juno as he did so that Juno was able to see sweat beading up on his forehead.

“Are you really okay, or did you just say that because you didn’t want me to worry?”

Peter didn’t answer. He was shaking, Juno noticed, and almost hyperventilating.

“Nureyev,” Juno said in a warning tone. He glanced down over Peter’s torso, scanning for injuries.

“I told you, I’m *fine,*” said Peter weakly. He gritted his teeth as their pursuers crashed against the door with a jolt.

Juno continued his investigation until he saw the scorch mark on the back of Peter’s right thigh. It had hit him just above the knee, and through the burned fabric Juno could see a round burn mark caked with blood.

“*Shit,* Nureyev,” Juno breathed. The door shook once more. “When were you gonna tell me you got hit?”

“It wasn’t relevant —”

The door rattled. “Of course it’s *relevant!* Shit, okay, when do the comms come back online?”

A trickle of blood ran down the back of Peter’s calf as they braced against the door once more. “Two minutes,” he said. “If Rita and Jet aren’t into the system by now, they’re not getting in.”

The door stopped rattling. Peter relaxed against it. His leg began to tremble in earnest. Juno offered him an arm and helped him slide down to the ground. He glanced around for a moment before reaching

to tear the fabric from the bottom of his dress. Before he could, Peter held up a hand and, with the other, dug into his pocket. He pulled out a small roll of bandages and leaned down to tie it around his leg.

Juno grabbed his hand gently and took the roll. He leaned down and unwound the bandage, tying it tightly around the wound. Peter winced, and Juno's heart leapt into his throat.

"Next time," Juno said, "you need to tell me."

"We didn't have time to stop," said Peter. "We were being pursued. We are *still* being pursued. Buddy and Vespa will be here soon, and I can patch myself up in the meantime."

Juno tied the knot tightly and withdrew, his heart still pounding halfway out of his chest. "You scared me," he said. "*Fuck,* Peter—"

"I am not a *child,* Juno," he snapped. "I can take care of myself."

Faintly, Juno heard a beep. Peter sighed and lifted a hand to his ear. Juno sat back and waited as Peter read out their location. Within a couple of minutes, the RUBY-7 appeared at the balcony, the back door popping open to admit the two of them. Juno helped Peter up and wrapped an arm around his waist to take the weight off of his knee. As soon as they were inside, Buddy hit the autopilot and turned in her seat to glare at the two of them.

"What happened?"

Juno scowled. Vespa turned in her seat and gestured to Peter's leg, which he lifted without complaint. She set about inspecting his wound while he explained the conflict. Juno leaned against Peter's shoulder as Vespa worked, but he didn't say anything; he could feel the tension between them, and he wasn't sure where to start unraveling it.

They sped off toward the *Carte Blanche* in uncomfortable silence. Buddy tried to fill it by informing them that the hack on the GAS had been successful, and that it was utterly disabled on Vishnu. Juno knew he should have been relieved or even proud, but all he could feel was a dull anxiety at the back of his mind, gnawing away at any other emotions until they were obliterated. When they finally reached the ship, Juno helped Peter climb out of the car and hooked an arm under his shoulders, trying to pull his thoughts back from the brink. Buddy supported Peter from the other side, and together they helped him limp toward the medical bay.

Juno sat beside Peter as Vespa worked. His leg bounced with nervous energy. Peter was silent as stone, barely flinching at Vespa's brisk and businesslike touch. When she had finished, she gave Juno a meaningful look — *What the hell did you do?* — and left the two of them alone.

The silence stretched on, neither of them willing or able to break the stalemate. Juno had no idea where to begin. His heart still clenched with fear every time he thought of what might have happened that day, when he pictured Nureyev leaning against that door, face pale and beaded with sweat. It took everything in him not to get up and pace.

Eventually, Peter sighed. "Juno, darling," he said softly, and Juno's head snapped up to face him. Peter was still pale, but he had wiped all irritation from his face, leaving only exhaustion.

"Want me to take you back to our room?"

Peter nodded. "Please."

Juno helped him down from Vespa's examination table and once again hooked an arm around his waist, letting Peter support himself with Juno's shoulders. He guided Peter back to their room. Peter was silent aside from the occasional sharp intake of breath — he was in pain, and Juno knew it, but he wasn't letting Juno hear it, and that hurt. From somewhere in the bowels of the ship came Buddy's voice, probably updating the others about Peter's condition. Juno couldn't find the energy to care that the update was happening without him.

When they reached their room, Juno helped Peter sit on the edge of the bed and grabbed him a clean tee shirt and soft sweatpants. They changed in silence. Juno was beginning to think that breaking it would lead to a real fight, and his anxiety flared again at the thought. He was desperately trying not to flash back to fights with previous partners, reassuring himself that Peter's anger wasn't going to *hurt* him, but it was a struggle not to flinch as he lay down and Peter stretched out a hand to curl around his forearm.

"Juno," he whispered, and Juno struggled to meet his eye.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," Peter replied. He leaned in and kissed Juno on the cheek. When he withdrew, his expression was still solemn, but his eyes were soft. "I love you," he whispered. "We can talk in the morning, yes?"

Juno nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “Tomorrow.”

“I’m angry, but it’s okay,” said Peter. “I’m not leaving you.”

Juno nodded and let Peter pull him close, resting his head against Peter’s chest. “I know,” he whispered. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

He lay there for hours before Peter’s slow heartbeat lulled him into an uneasy sleep.

[image]

Chapter End Notes

Art by noir-martian (on Tumblr) aka @random_jocelyn (on twitter)

Beta'd by looking-for-destroya (bigmcworm on ao3)

Find me on tumblr as hundred-separate-lines

In which Juno makes a mistake

Chapter Summary

> *Juno felt the frustration and fear build in his chest. He looked back to Peter "I thought my whole job here was to protect you!"*
>
> *"I don't need to be protected, Juno!" Peter snapped. The table fell silent.*

Chapter Notes

> Content warnings: Pregnancy, abortion mention, police violence, arrest/capture

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Juno awoke to find Peter wrapped around him, a strand of his hair tickling Juno's forehead, his fingers tangled in Juno's shirt. He slowly extricated himself from Peter's grasp. His stomach was tied in knots at the thought of discussing their argument from the day before, and he only spared Peter a glance before sneaking out of the room.

As soon as he stepped into the hallway, a wave of nausea penetrated through the haze of nerves. He headed quickly toward the bathroom as it threatened to overcome him. Years of drugs and drinking had made Juno into a champion puker, and he was huddled over the toilet in seconds. It wasn't the first morning in recent weeks that he had awoken to such unpleasant symptoms, but he found himself just as confused and frustrated as he had been every time he'd awoken to get suddenly and violently ill.

When he was finished, he rinsed his face in the sink before opening the door to find Vespa, one eyebrow raised, her hair hanging in greasy strands down her forehead.

"Are you going to let me take a look today, Steel, or do I have to wait another couple of weeks?"

Juno rolled his eyes, but he followed Vespa willingly as she led him to the med bay. He tried not to flinch as she shut the door with a loud bang.

"Okay," she said, turning to Juno and pulling on a pair of gloves. "Symptoms. Vomiting?"

“Yeah, obviously.”

“For how long?”

Juno counted back in his head. “A month?” he guessed.

“Okay,” said Vespa. “How often?”

Juno shrugged. “Every couple days.”

“And how many times per day?”

“Once or twice, right after I wake up.”

Vespa hummed and grabbed a small needle and syringe from the shelf behind Juno. “Anything else?”

Juno shrugged. “Headaches, about the same amount of time. I’ve been tired, too, but who isn’t, with all the shit that’s been going on?”

Vespa leaned over Juno’s arm to take a sample. He kept his gaze resolutely on the wall behind her.

“Does anything make the nausea worse?”

Juno frowned and considered the question for a moment. “Some smells, I guess? I don’t know. I haven’t been paying that much attention.”

Vespa pulled the needle from Juno’s arm and handed him a small piece of gauze to press to his elbow. As she set the syringe into a slot on one of her many machines, she asked, “And why didn’t you come talk to me about this sooner?”

Juno shrugged. “Thought I just had food poisoning.”

“For a month?”

“*Really bad* food poisoning.”

Vespa rolled her eyes and pressed a couple of buttons on the machine. It beeped with all of the musical quality and none of the warmth of the RUBY-7, then spat out a string of numbers and letters that flashed so quickly Juno couldn’t track them with his eyes. Vespa grunted and pressed another button, and then nodded.

“When was your last period, Steel?”

Juno's heart dropped.

"Uhh," he said, thinking desperately. "I don't know?"

"I'm running your sample again to be sure, but the machine's saying you're pregnant," said Vespa.

Juno's mind went blank.

"What?"

Vespa shot him a pitying look. "Come on, Steel," she said. "You've gotta admit, it's pretty textbook. Morning sickness? Made worse by strong smells?"

"Shit," Juno breathed. "Shit, shit, shit."

"Hey," said Vespa, putting a hand awkwardly on his shoulder. "Steel. It's okay."

Juno tried to pull himself together, but his mind had already spiraled out of control. Sarah Steel's voice was ringing inside his head, along with every thought he'd ever had about parenting. He began to hyperventilate.

"Shit. Juno, hey, look at me. Come on. Breathe with me. It's okay. Look, breathe in, breathe out, right?"

Juno let Vespa's grip on his shoulder ground him. He followed her breathing as carefully as he could, doing his best to shove down the panic that was rising in his throat. It was a struggle, but as the minutes ticked by his breath and his heart slowed. When he finally had the energy to speak again, his voice came out strained.

"Are you sure?"

Vespa glanced at the monitor again, and then back at him. "Yeah, Steel," she said softly - or, at least, more softly than her usual growl. "I'm sure."

Juno nodded. "Okay," he said. "What the hell do I do?"

Vespa gave him a hard look. "Same thing anyone else does," she said. "If you don't want it, I can help with that. If you want it, I can help with that too. Either way, nothing leaves this room without your say-so. Doctor-patient confidentiality is still a thing, even in a crime family."

Juno scoffed. “Sure. Guess it’s the only kind of confidentiality you can get on a ship this small.”

“Do you know what you want to do?” Vespa asked.

Juno shook his head. “I can barely think right now,” he said. “I don’t even know what I want for breakfast.”

Vespa nodded. “Talk to the thief about it, then,” she said. “Or don’t, whatever. Just let me know when you’ve decided. Sooner rather than later.”

“Okay,” said Juno. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” said Vespa. Then, after a pause, “What else is family good for?”

Juno drifted out of the med bay in a stupor. The world felt like it was moving around him, like rather than walking to the kitchen he was floating and the kitchen was speeding toward him. He found himself at the coffee machine before long, surrounded by fragments of conversation — apparently Vespa had followed him and was now discussing the day’s plans with Jet — and the hums and whirs of the ship that had become so comforting to him. When, he wondered, had that happened, exactly? Had it been in that first week, when he had finally been able to fall asleep without jumping at the sound of something turning on or off in the heart of the ship? Had it been that first year, when Peter had joined him in his room and in his life? Or had it only been recently that Juno had come to think of the *Carte Blanche* as home, now that he was so often forced away from it? Now that it was the only place where their little family came back together to eat and rest and be well?

Juno let his mug fill with steaming coffee before taking his usual seat at the table. He tuned out Jet and Vespa’s conversation, instead focusing on the bitter chocolate-y taste of his coffee, willing it to bring him back into his body. In the end, it wasn’t enough, but the sound of Buddy clearing her throat to bring them to attention was.

“Good morning, everyone,” she said. Juno realized that he had managed to tune out Peter and Rita’s arrival, as well. Rita glanced at him with concern, but Peter just sipped at his tea beside Juno, arranging himself artfully on the seat in a way that would have sent Juno tumbling toward the ground.

He let himself tune the conversation out again as Buddy gave a brief

description of their mission from the previous day. The successful destruction of the Guardian Angel System on Vishnu was being celebrated in every major planetside city, with people partying on the street well into the night. The live stream of the ball had been extremely effective in keeping law enforcement and the New Kinshasan government from noticing the hack until it was too late, leaving them scrambling to pick up the pieces and rebuild. From the second the system had gone offline, millions of Nureyevists had physically destroyed every visible laser and camera. It was a major blow to the surveillance state, one that would hardly have been imaginable even a year before. Even Ruslan, who had been injured in the laser fire, had called it an unmitigated success.

“That’s why,” Buddy said, “Ruslan has called an emergency meeting. It’s very small — just six of us, from the highest security level. We’ll be planning our next move. New Kinshasa is very vulnerable right now, thanks to our wonderful Rita, and we need to strike while the iron is hot. Peter and I will be attending that meeting in an hour.”

“Wait,” said Juno, suddenly coming back to himself. “Vespa and I are coming too, right?”

Buddy shook her head. “It’s very exclusive, darling. Ruslan insisted. She was afraid of any security risks. You and Vespa will stay on-board the *Carte Blanche.* Think of it as a rest. After all, after your work yesterday, you certainly deserve one.”

Juno glanced carefully back at Peter. “I’m supposed to come with you,” he said. “And Vespa’s supposed to go with Buddy. That was the deal.”

Peter at least had the decency to look a bit shamed by that. “I know, Juno, dear,” he said, “but it really is only the highest security clearance.”

“I thought the Nureyevists didn’t have a ranking system. I thought they believed in openness and democracy and equality and all that shit.” Juno had to fight to keep from yelling, but anger and frustration crept into his voice at every word. “I’ve been on all of your planetside missions. I’ve gotten hurt for this movement, same as you. How are we not the same clearance?”

“We need to act quickly,” said Buddy. “Ruslan made an executive decision.”

“Yeah, bullshit,” said Juno. “She just doesn’t want anyone questioning

her orders."

"Steel," said Vespa, "it's fine. Take the day off. We've got eyes in the skies. Rita's already set up a camera."

"Yeah, boss," said Rita. "I hacked into a couple of security cameras so we can watch the building. Nothing's gonna happen. It's a secret base. Well, okay, it's *supposed* to be secret, but you know nobody keeps a secret from Rita, Thief and Hacker and Ex-Detective Extraordinaire! Anyway, we'll know if anything happens, okay? They're not going in there completely alone."

Juno felt the frustration and fear build in his chest. He looked back to Peter "I *thought* my whole job here was to protect you!"

"I don't need to be protected, Juno!" Peter snapped. The table fell silent, their eyes falling on Peter, who visibly took a deep breath before speaking again. "I can protect myself. It will be perfectly fine. I understand that my injury yesterday worried you, and I appreciate your concern, but we are going to this meeting *alone.*"

Juno looked around the table at the others, willing someone &mdash *anyone* — to say something that would change Peter's mind. When no one did, he shook his head.

"Fine. Okay. But at least let us keep watch from nearby."

He glanced up at Buddy, who gave him a long, considering look. After a moment, she nodded.

"You, Jet, Rita, and Vespa will take us there in the other car. We'll stop a few blocks away from the building. Peter and I will be entering through a tunnel system that Ruslan identified, so we won't be seen entering or exiting. You can monitor us on the security cameras around the building." When both Juno and Peter opened their mouths to protest, she raised a hand in warning. "I don't want to hear another word about it," she said. "We'll be leaving in ten minutes. Meet me by the car."

Juno huffed, pushed back his chair, and stormed off toward his room. He knew, somewhere in the more logical part of his brain, that this anger wasn't helping, but his mind was too clouded by fear to think straight. He made it to his room and collapsed, huffing, onto the bed, only to immediately stand up again and begin pacing.

Peter was going to be *fine,* he told himself, but all he could think of

was their delayed argument, and the fact that it had started in front of the others, and the fact that Peter was going without him, and that he had to tell Peter he was *pregnant,* and they were in the middle of a revolution, what the fuck was he supposed to do with that, and the frustration and fear had tears pricking up in the corner of his eyes, which only made him *angrier,* and—

The door opened, interrupting his spiral. Peter moved softly, but he projected every motion as he approached Juno. In a back corner of his mind, Juno was grateful.

“Are you ready to leave?” he asked.

Juno nodded.

“I’m sorry,” said Peter. “I know we agreed that you would be with me. I know that this meeting goes against that agreement.”

Juno sighed. “I don’t think I trust Ruslan,” he said, thinking back to that golden watch, to an old man sitting on a park bench, to a life so far away that it hardly felt real anymore.

“I know,” said Peter. “We have to do this, though. New Kinshasa is finally at a disadvantage. There’s a real chance that we can win. These people need our help, Juno.”

“I know they do,” Juno snapped. He paused, taking a moment to calm himself before speaking again. “I know. I just wish — damn it, Nureyev, I just wish I could go with you. I just want you to be safe.”

Peter stepped closer and wrapped his arms around Juno. “I will be,” he muttered against Juno’s forehead. “You’ll be right behind me. Besides, it’ll be over in a few hours.”

Juno thought, for a moment, about telling Peter then. Maybe it would keep him on the *Carte Blanche,* if he knew Juno was pregnant. Maybe it would be enough to convince him to let Juno attend the meeting. Maybe it wouldn’t make a difference either way, and it was the right thing to do.

He tried, but the words stuck in his mouth. It didn’t seem fair to try and keep Peter home that way. Or maybe he was a coward, and that was just a reason that made him seem braver. Maybe he was just afraid that saying it would make it more real. Juno figured it didn’t matter either way.

Peter gave him one last kiss on the forehead and squeezed his arm, and then stepped out of the room.

The ride to the surface of Brahma was tense. Rita had set up a multi-screen surveillance system in the passenger seat. Juno, Peter, Buddy, and Rita were squeezed into the back seat, with Peter sitting almost on Juno's lap. Juno tried to ignore the feeling in the pit of his stomach that said everything would go wrong and pulled Peter closer.

They parked outside of a nondescript building and Buddy and Peter climbed out. Before they left, Peter leaned down and kissed Juno on the cheek.

"I'll see you soon, Juno, dear," he whispered, and then they were gone.

The time passed slowly. Jet and Rita argued for about twenty minutes about the outcome of the most recent episode of *Are You Smarter Than a Sewer Rabbit?*

"I just think it ain't fair to ask about a fossil on ancient Earth. I mean, who's Cleve?"

"'Cleveland' was an ancient Terran torture city," Jet explained. "Criminals from all walks of life were sent there as the ultimate punishment for their sins. The *Dunkleosteus* was worshiped as a god, to save the ancient Cleveland people from the terror of Emperor Cleve's reign."

"I know, I know, but who even knows that? And anyway, that rabbit knew all kinds of stuff about particle physics. I just don't think it's fair to ask him about a fish!"
Juno glanced at the screen, which showed another nondescript building. This one looked abandoned, with floor-to-ceiling windows along the first floor and a sign over the door that was too faded to be read.

"Is that where they are?" he asked, pointing.

Rita nodded. "Miss Buddy said they're on the second floor. They got rid of their comms before they went in, but I still got eyes on the building, and I can move the drone in closer if I gotta. Plus, Mistah Nureyev's got a panic button just in case there's an emergency."

Jet glanced over at him. "It will be all right, Juno."

Juno sighed and let himself relax against Rita's side. "Yeah, I know, big guy. Thanks."

Juno tuned out their conversation again and kept his eyes on the screen. Every so often, a person would wander past, oblivious to the fact that they were passing a building in which six people were plotting to bring down a government. A person in a purple jacket walked past, and Juno tried to imagine being in their place. Was the man in green a spy for New Kinshasa, or just an innocent whose only involvement in the rebellion was the inconvenience it added to their commute? A couple of kids stood at the corner, waiting for a smaller one — a younger sibling, maybe? — to toddle over to them. Juno wondered if they would recover from growing up in a war zone. A person in a purple jacket walked past, and—

A person in a purple jacket walked past.

Juno leaned forward and touched Rita lightly on the arm. "Hey," he said, squinting at the screen. "That person already walked by."

"Huh?" said Rita.

"Look," said Juno, pointing at one corner of the video. "A man in green is going to be right there in thirty seconds. Time it."

Rita pulled up some sort of console and watched. Sure enough, the man in green walked by, his motions an exact echo of the ones Juno had seen a few minutes earlier.

"Shit," said Juno, panic rising in his chest. "Shit, Rita, it's a loop."

"No way, Mistah Steel," said Rita. "I got all kinds of traps set up. Nobody's hacking into this."

"Well, somebody did," said Juno, "because the goddamn video's looping. Shit. Shit. They're in trouble. We have to get them out."

Juno reached for the door handle, only for Vespa to reach out a hand and stop him. "Are you kidding me?" she asked. "They didn't call yet. We stay here."

"They know we're here. Vespa, they could be in the building *right now.*"

"If we run in there, we give them away. They could be watching *us.* We don't go in without the signal."

“If we leave them alone, they’ll die!”

Vespa shook her head. “They can fend for themselves. They’ve been in worse situations. We wait.”

Juno pretended to deflate, nodding slowly. Vespa pulled her arm away from him.

“I’m sorry, Steel,” she said. “We just have to wait.”

Juno flung himself out of the car.

Vespa’s shout of surprise followed him as he hit the ground running, his coat billowing out behind him. He ran like he had never run before, worry and determination pushing him forward. He rounded a corner and headed directly for the building they had been watching through the security cameras. He barreled through the door and into a deserted lobby, filled only with discarded furniture. He wasn’t sure in which room, exactly, the meeting was taking place, so he stepped into the room as carefully as he could and began to mark out the possible routes Peter could have taken.

The sound of the door opening behind him sent him spinning, but it was only Vespa. She had a look of indescribable fury on her face, even worse than the ordinary anger she displayed when she usually saw Juno. He ignored her and began to search.

“You’re going to get us all *killed,*” she growled.

Juno opened the first door that he encountered. It led to an abandoned bathroom. “If you’re not gonna help me look for them, you can leave,” he said.

“Juno *fucking* Steel, I swear,” Vespa said, and then the glass shattered behind them.

Juno grabbed Vespa’s arm and pulled her into a sprint as the New Kinshasan riot police, outfitted head-to-toe in dark body armor, burst into the lobby. He pulled them toward a door at the back of the room labelled “Stairs” and shoved her through it, pulling his blaster out from its holster. When he made his way into the stairwell, Vespa had her blaster in hand as well. Together, they sprinted up the steps.

The second floor was swarming with riot police, as well, so they had no choice but to immediately sprint back into the stairwell and up to the third and highest floor. They made their way upstairs and through

the door, sprinting past the couple of riot police that had made it that far and into a small room at the back of the building, where they both slumped against the door and panted.

Juno imagined that if they weren't completely out of breath, Vespa would have been yelling at him. He let himself enjoy the momentary reprieve.

When they had caught their breath, Juno glanced at Vespa, who was glaring back at him with all the rage she had.

"We have to find them," he gasped.

"I'm gonna kill you," she replied.

The sound of shuffling papers made them snap to attention. A desk in the corner of the room had rattled, papers tumbling to the ground in almost-slow motion. Juno and Vespa both raised their blasters.

Motioning for Vespa to stay by the door, Juno crept forward. He kept his blaster raised as he approached the desk. It rattled once more, sending a few more sheets of paper drifting toward the ground.

As he rounded the desk, his finger on the trigger, he heard a sharp yelp.

"Mick?"

It was, indeed, Mick Mercury, crouched below the desk with his hands shielding his head. At the sound of his name, he looked up. Relief flooded his face as he met Juno's eye.

"Jay-Jay! You're here!"

Juno extended a hand and helped him extricate himself from underneath the desk. As soon as he was standing, he wrapped Juno in a tight hug.

"Get off me," Juno grumbled, but he let Mick hold on for another second before pushing him away.

"Thank goodness you're here, Jay-Jay. It was a total setup! Those Brahman goons chased us down the hallway. Good thing I'm so smart and I managed to find those stairs, or it would've been over for old Mick Mercury, huh?"

"Shit, Mick," said Juno. "Where's my husband?"

Mick had the decency to frown at that. “I don’t know. I’m real sorry, Jay-Jay. But if you’re looking for him, you gotta hurry, Juno, ‘cause they definitely grabbed Ruslan, and I didn’t see if the others made it out okay.”

Juno glanced back at Vespa, who was still standing at the door with her blaster raised. “There’s no way we get through that,” she said, nodding toward the sounds outside. “Shit! How’s the drop?”

Juno peered out of the window behind the desk. It was a three-story drop, but that was nothing if he could get Jet and Rita to pull up beside the window. Doing that, though, would mean abandoning Buddy and Peter.

“Are you sure we can’t get out that way?” Juno asked desperately.

“*Juno Steel.* There’s a hundred riot police out that way, and none of them are setting their blasters to ‘stun.’ If we can’t get out that window, we’re dead. We can’t help anybody if we’re dead.”

“Fine,” said Juno. He pressed a finger to the comms unit in his ear. “Rita, do you have my location?”

“I can be there in thirty seconds, Mistah Steel,” she said.

“Watch out for the cops. Make it fast,” he said. Then he turned to the others. “I’m sorry, Vespa. I can’t go. Not if he’s still here.”

“Steel, you *idiot*—”

That brought him to a stop. Peter’s voice echoed in his head, light years away and years into the past, the horrible desperation of Peter’s pleas from behind a locked door. Juno shut his eyes and brushed them away.

“I’m sorry,” he croaked, and opened the window, preparing to climb out.

As he hitched one leg over the side, something caught his eye. The swarm of riot police had mostly made their way into the building, although a few were milling around outside. There was a small group of them, though, that was making its way purposefully toward a cop car parked outside the building. As he watched, he realized that there was someone in their midst fighting desperately to free himself from their grasp.

“No,” Juno said, almost in monotone. He was frozen, watching as Peter pulled himself from their grasp only to be grabbed again, outnumbered and alone. From outside of himself, he felt Mick grab his arm and kept him anchored to the building, even as his body threatened to topple to the sidewalk below.

Peter fought, but he was no match for the strength of twenty armored officers. They shoved him bodily into the car, closing off every possible exit. In one last bid for freedom, Juno saw Peter gaze desperately up at the sky.

“Peter!” Juno screamed. The sound was ripped from his throat and carried off with the wind, and for a heartbreaking moment, Juno thought Peter wouldn’t hear him — that Peter would be taken, alone and scared, without ever seeing Juno again.

It was enough, though, that Peter’s eyes snapped to the building. He met Juno’s eye, and Juno reached out his empty hand toward his husband.

Then the door slammed shut, and Peter was gone.

[image]

Chapter End Notes

Art by noir-martian (on Tumblr) aka @random_jocelyn (on twitter)

Beta'd by looking-for-destroya (bigmcworm on ao3)

Find me on tumblr as hundred-separate-lines

In which there is a car chase

Chapter Summary

> *“I can’t tell where they’re heading,” Rita said, frantically pulling up maps and cross-referencing them with the car’s trajectory. “I think they’re just trying to lose us.”*
>
> *“But we can keep tracking them, right?” Juno asked.*
>
> *“They’ll figure out he has the tracker sooner or later,” said Vespa. “We’ve gotta figure out where they’re heading now."*

Chapter Notes

> Content warnings: Discussion of imprisonment, murder, pregnancy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Juno watched helplessly as the love of his life was taken from him.

Rita and Jet pulled up beneath the window just as the cop car disappeared around a corner. Mick finally let go of Juno, and he tumbled into the back seat, making room for the others as quickly as he could.

“They’re heading north,” he gasped, grabbing the driver’s seat for balance. “We have to follow them.” Vespa slammed the door behind her and Jet sped off behind the cop car.

“I told you not to run in there, Steel!” Vespa yelled.

Juno scowled. “Rita, do you have a trace on them?”

“I’m trying, Mistah Steel, but you’re gonna have to give me a minute.”

The buildings rushed by them as Jet took hairpin turn after hairpin turn. Juno longed for the familiar beeping of the RUBY-7, but Jet was a great driver in any car; within a few minutes, they spotted a swarm of cop cars racing toward the center of the city.

“There!” Juno shouted, pointing. Jet wrenched the steering wheel to the side, and Juno grabbed onto the seat for dear life.

The cop cars began to scatter as soon as Jet started catching up to

them. Juno glanced at Rita's screen, where a small red dot traveled down a side street.

"We wanna take Baker Street," Rita said, typing furiously. "I think there's a little alley— *THERE!*" The car swerved dangerously again, flinging Juno against the door. He groaned, and Mick pulled him back from the door, keeping an iron grip around Juno's shoulders and holding him steady.

The alley was narrow, but Jet threaded it with precision. The dot on Rita's screen kept pulsing, guiding them through back streets and past crumbling buildings. Juno tried not to be sick as they raced through the city.

"I can't tell where they're heading," Rita said, frantically pulling up maps and cross-referencing them with the car's trajectory. "I think they're just trying to lose us."

"But we can keep tracking them, right?" Juno asked.

"They'll figure out he has the tracker sooner or later," said Vespa. "We've gotta figure out where they're heading *now*."

Jet muttered something under his breath before swerving again, then said "Without a visual on the car, we will be unable to follow them for much longer."

"Then get a visual on the car!" Juno yelled.

"I am *trying,*" said Jet. "Rita?"

"They're turning left at the next intersection. Signal from the tracker is still real strong, Mistah Jet."

Juno leaned forward and swept his eye over the map, trying as hard as he could to piece together their destination. The prison was too obvious; the town hall was even more so. Juno guessed they would try to get off the planet at some point, but that would be obvious from the ground.

"They must have some meeting place," said Juno. "Somewhere they can hand off prisoners, or keep them until the heat dies down. Where the hell are they going?"

Just as he finished speaking, the small red dot that Rita was following blinked out of existence.

“Shit!” Juno yelled. Jet wrenched the car up, rushing above the line of buildings with enough speed that Juno’s ears popped. He fell back into his seat as they evened out, cushioned by Mick’s arm. Jet scanned the buildings below with urgency.

“I do not see them,” he said, his voice tinged with panic.

Rita was typing frantically into her console, but it was no use — the red dot had disappeared, and so had the car. Juno rolled down the window and stuck his head outside, straining to see the streets below, but it looked like all the cop cars had disappeared.

“Are they underground somewhere?” Juno asked. “Rita, is there a subway system? Some kind of garage?”

Rita sobbed from behind him. “I’m sorry, boss,” she said. “I’m looking. There’s nowhere in the blueprints for the city. If they took him somewhere, it’s gotta be top-secret.”

“Hack into their systems, then! There has to be *something*.”

“That’s how I got this map,” Rita cried. “If there’s anything more secret than this, they got it on a piece of paper locked up somewhere. I can’t— I don’t—”

“We can go back to the ship and get the RUBY-7,” said Vespa. “If we’ve got security footage—”

“It’s no use,” Rita wailed. “I don’t know how they did it, but they have the same video looping on all the cameras around here. I can’t see any trace of it in the code. I don’t know where he is.”

“The RUBY can look at other footage, though, right? And find him?”

“Those cars have painted windows,” Mick said. “Not tinted, *painted*. There’s no way he’ll show up on camera.”

“But we know which way they were going,” said Juno desperately. “We can trace their trajectory.”

Rita shook her head again. “I can find sixteen cars that passed through the spot where we lost track of him,” she said, typing rapidly, “and there ain’t any way to tell which one was him. We could chase one of ‘em all day and lose the right one, and that’s assuming we can find ‘em.” She turned to Juno, eyes full of regret. “I don’t know what to do.”

Vespa nodded and stared down at her lap. “We don’t know if they got Buddy,” she said. “She might still be back there. We could circle back.”

“So, what, we just leave Nureyev to die?” Juno asked, his voice rising in panic.

“We know we can’t reach him,” she said. “We might be able to save her. I know you’re worried about *your* husband, Steel, but I’m also worried about my *wife.*”

“If she’s back there, then she’s either already been captured or she’s safe and hiding. We *know* Nureyev’s in danger!”

“And we can’t do anything about it!”

“Enough!” Jet yelled, loud enough that everyone froze in shock. They all stared at him, his grip white-knuckled against the wheel. He cleared his throat.

“Juno,” he said, “we do not know if the thief is even still alive. Vespa, we will circle back and check the building for Buddy, as long as it has been cleared of police.”

“What?” Juno shouted. “Jet, look, I know the two of you don’t exactly get along, but we can’t just *abandon* him—”

“This has nothing to do with my relationship with Peter Nureyev,” said Jet. “We have already lost him. We may still be able to recover Buddy and the others who attended the meeting.”

“But—”

“I am turning the car around, and that is final, Juno,” said Jet. “In Buddy’s absence, I am assuming control, at least until we return to the ship.” He glanced at Juno in the rear view mirror. His eyes were soft and pitying. “I am truly sorry,” he said. Juno looked away.

The drive back to the building was silent. Juno fumed in the back seat. Mick turned to him several times as if to speak before turning back. Juno almost felt bad for him, but he was also stupidly, irrationally angry that Mick had made it out of another scrape while Peter was gone. He didn’t trust himself to speak.

The building was empty when they arrived, the same way it had been when Juno had burst into it less than an hour earlier. Juno’s gut

flooded with guilt as he glanced at the shattered glass covering the floor, refracting rainbows onto the walls around him.

“We’ll split up,” said Vespa. “I’ll take Rita.”

She grabbed Rita, who was still crying quietly, and dragged her toward the stairwell. Juno, Mick, and Jet searched behind the counters on the first floor. When they had swept the first floor, they made it up to the top floor. There was no sign of the others. Vespa and Rita joined them on the top floor after a little while, Rita no longer crying, and together they searched it again. Vespa called Buddy’s comms units over and over as they searched, while Rita tried to contact the others. It was no use; their comms remained frustratingly silent.

After about an hour, calls began to trickle in from rebels across the system. The most haunting was a call from Khabib, whose voice was full of worry, which was frightening because it was the first emotion Juno had ever heard them display. It quickly became clear that the others hadn’t returned, either. Mick took control of the comms after that, and Juno searched the entire building again, fighting off tears.

When the sun had set and night had truly fallen, Rita glanced up at the rest of them.

“I think there’s police coming back,” she said. “I set up an alert, and it looks like they put out a call for us.”

“All right,” said Jet. “We will return to the ship.”

Vespa looked like she was about to argue, but she bit her lip and nodded. Juno couldn’t muster up the energy to fight it. He let Rita grab his hand and pull him gently out into the night. They returned to the other car, and Mick went back to the car that he had arrived in, promising that he would contact some of the other factions and report back if there was any news.

They rode silently back to the *Carte Blanche.* Rita switched places with Vespa this time so she could keep hold of both of their hands. On a better day, it might have been an anchor for him. This time, he was already adrift, lost in a roiling sea.

The RUBY-7 chirped when they arrived back. Jet swept a comforting hand over her hood. It seemed that Rita’s earlier despair had faded into firm determination; she steered Juno back inside and to the kitchen, then busied herself making him a cup of hot chocolate. A

tentative sip revealed she had left out the salmon dust. Juno was quietly grateful.

Vespa stormed in a few minutes later. Her greasy hair was falling in her face, and Juno noticed that grey roots were peaking through the green. She probably hadn't touched it up since the wedding. Thinking of the wedding hurt, so Juno went back to pretending that the only thing in the world was his mug of hot chocolate. It wasn't very effective, but it was a lot better than the alternative.

Vespa slammed a fist down on the table. "What the hell were you thinking, Steel?" she growled.

Rita looked up worriedly from where she was preparing another mug. "Miss Vespa," she said, "I don't think now's the best time…"

Vespa ignored her. "If you hadn't run in there like an idiot, they would still be here."

"If you had fought to go in with them, we could have gotten them out of there!"

"They probably followed us right into the building. It was a fucking trap, Steel, and you waltzed right into it, because you can't let other people take care of themselves."

"You left Nureyev to *die* in that car because you thought Buddy *might* have been in that building!" Juno shouted, his voice breaking. "How the fuck could you do that? How could you let us abandon him? They're gonna torture him and kill him and it's *all your fault.*"

"They took Buddy, too, asshole! How do you think I feel?"

"Boss, really, I don't think this is a good idea…"

Juno stood. "They're gonna kill her, too!" he shouted. "We could have *protected* them."

"Us and what army? There were hundreds of cops, Steel. There was nothing we could have done. If we had just left them alone, they would have made it out of there fine. They're *adults,* Steel. They didn't need bodyguards."

Juno opened his mouth to argue, but he didn't have anything left to say. Vespa was right. The realization left a cold pit in his stomach. He sat back down and took another long sip of hot chocolate. Rita handed

the second mug to Vespa and came back to stand beside Juno. She wrapped him in a strong hug.

“It’ll be all right,” she said to the two of them. “We’ll get them back. You’ll see. They’ll be back in no time.”

Jet appeared in the doorway. His face, usually so stoic, was solemn.

“Rita,” he said, “may I speak with you for a moment?”

Rita looked at Juno and raised her eyebrows, as if to ask permission. Juno nodded. She squeezed him once around the middle before making her way out of the kitchen with Jet, unusually silent.

Juno and Vespa sat in silence for a moment. Hot shame filled Juno completely as he thought of the things he’d said to her, of the fact that it was his fault — *his fault* — that both of their spouses were gone.

Vespa took a deep breath. "I'm sorry for yelling at you, Steel," she said. "That wasn't fair."

“Shit,” he whispered. He buried his head in his hands. “Vespa, what the hell are we going to do?”

The stool beside him scraped as Vespa sat. There was another long stretch of silence. Just as Juno was about to check to see that she was still there, Vespa spoke.

“We’re going to find them,” she said. “We’re going to find them, and we’re going to get them back, and we’re going to kill *every last motherfucker* involved in taking them away from us.”

“How?” Juno croaked. “They could be anywhere. Hell, they could be dead already.”

“If they’re dead, I will personally put a hole through the head of every member of the New Kinshasan government,” said Vespa. The venom and determination in her voice sent a shiver down Juno’s spine. She paused, took an audible breath, and when she spoke again, her voice had softened. “I don’t think they are, though. I think New Kinshasa's got leverage now, for the first time in months. Why would they give up the advantage?”

Juno sat up and looked over to her. “Why would they keep thre potential security risks alive?”

“They don’t want to make them martyrs.”

“They also don’t want to make them too tempting.”

“Maybe they do,” said Vespa. “It’s a good trap, if they can swing it.”

“They already got us once. Why would we fall for it again?”

Vespa slumped against the counter. “I don’t know,” she said. “Because we love them? Because I married her on-camera? Because we’re very publicly their partners? Because they inspired a movement? It doesn’t matter if it’s a trap, anyway, because we’re not leaving them behind.”

Juno let out a long huff of air. “Yeah,” he said. “You really think we can get them back?”

“No,” said Vespa, barking out a laugh. “Not a chance. But I’m gonna try. Like hell am I letting them take our family without a fight. I’ll tear their city down brick by brick for Buddy, and I know she’d do the same for me. And I’d do it for Nureyev, too, much as I hate to admit it.”

“Okay,” said Juno. “Thanks, Vespa. And I’m sorry for yelling at you and for running in there today. I should have listened to you. I should have—”

“Hey,” said Vespa. She scowled, then wrapped an arm gingerly around his shoulders. “Juno. It’s not your fault. You didn’t know.” She gave him an awkward pat.

“Are you okay, boss?” said Rita from behind him. Juno turned to face her. She looked exhausted in a way she hadn’t been since they’d returned home from fighting the THEIA Souls. Juno gave her a weak smile.

“No,” he said, his voice cracking with emotion. “No, I’m not.”

Rita held out a hand. Juno took it and slid off his seat. She pulled him down the corridor toward their rooms, and Juno followed, exhaustion leaving him on autopilot. He stumbled a couple of times as they walked, but Rita led the way with a calm determination that made Juno’s heart feel just a bit lighter.

That lightness only lasted until they reached Juno’s door. Rita let go of his hand, and Juno placed it on the doorknob, only to freeze.

Behind that door was the room he shared with Peter. The thought of sleeping alone in that bed, especially knowing that Peter was in enemy hands, was too much to bear. His mind cycled again and again through the conversation that he'd had with Peter that morning, how they'd stood together in that room as Juno argued with himself about telling Peter he was pregnant. How Peter had pressed his lips to Juno's cheek and told him he loved him.

I should have told him, Juno thought. *Why didn't I tell him?*

Juno's heart shattered into a thousand pieces, and suddenly he was sobbing, barely able to stand under the weight of his grief. Rita was there, though, and she wrapped an arm around his waist, pulled his hand gently from the knob, and began to tug him down the hall. "C'mon, Mistah Steel," she muttered. Juno hardly heard it through a low keen of despair that started somewhere low in his chest and escaped from his ragged throat.

"You can stay with me, okay, boss? How does that sound? I'll grab some jammies from your room, okay? You don't have to go in there."

"He's gone," Juno wailed. "He's gone, Rita. He's gone."

"We'll get him back, boss," she said. "You'll see."

"Rita," Juno sobbed, and then she was depositing him on the bed, and Juno was doubled over, fighting to breathe. Rita rubbed a soothing hand up and down his back and let him bury his head in her shoulder. She made low, soothing noises for several long minutes. Juno let himself float above his body for a while, let the grief come out of him in whatever way it had to, and then returned, shaking, to a small kiss on the cheek.

"All right, boss?" she asked.

Juno met her eyes, so full of concern and sadness, and nearly laughed. "No," he said. "Rita, I— There's something I had to tell Peter, when we got back, and now… What if I can't? What if he never comes back?"

"We're gonna get him back," she said. "Real soon. You'll see."

"Rita," said Juno again, his eyes welling with tears, "I'm pregnant. I'm pregnant, and he doesn't even know. He's just gone, and I don't know if I'll ever— If he'll ever—"

“Oh, boss,” said Rita as his voice broke. Juno began to sob once more, in earnest, and Rita wrapped her arms around him and held him close until he fell asleep.

[image]

Chapter End Notes

Art by noir-martian (on Tumblr) aka @random_jocelyn (on twitter)

Beta'd by looking-for-destroya (bigmcworm on ao3)

Find me on tumblr as hundred-separate-lines

In which time's arrow marches forward

Chapter Summary

“We’re gonna get through this,” said Juno, because there was nothing else to say.

“I just didn’t want to lose her again,” Vespa replied. Her voice broke on the last word.

“You didn’t,” said Juno. “We didn’t lose them. We’re going to get them back. I swear.”

“I know. I know. And I’m sure as fuck not giving them up without a fight.”

Juno laughed, a bittersweet sound that did little to make him feel any less like he was lying. “See? They don’t stand a chance.”

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: implied torture, discussion of abortion, pregnancy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Juno rolled out of Rita’s bed the next morning to stumble, bleary-eyed, to the bathroom and sit by the toilet for half an hour while his stomach rolled. Rita joined him within a couple of minutes and pressed a cool cloth to the back of his neck. She wiped his face with another, cleaning the dried tears from around his eyes.

“Hey, boss,” she muttered. Juno just groaned and leaned over the toilet again.

Breakfast was silent. Vespa, Jet, and Juno sipped their coffee with stony expressions. Rita made a valiant attempt at starting a conversation, but when it became apparent that the others were unwilling or unable to communicate she pulled out her comms and began sending messages to the other factions of Nureyevists that were scattered across the system.

The day was hazy, and Juno felt distant from the rest of the world. He drifted from room to room, avoiding everyone except Rita, who doggedly pursued him and forced him to eat and take a shower. The

image of Peter being shoved into the back of the police car echoed in his mind, playing and replaying until Juno wanted to sob or scream or drink himself into a stupor if it meant it would finally stop. He almost cried with relief when Rita finally pulled him toward her room at the end of the day, guided him into a pair of soft sweatpants and a thin tee shirt, and tucked him under the covers. She wrapped herself around him. It took him hours to finally fall asleep.

The next day was an echo of that first one, and so was the next, and all the days after that, until a week had passed on the *Carte Blanche* with no news of Peter, Buddy, or Ruslan. On the seventh morning after Peter had been taken, Juno's lack of a breakfast was interrupted by Rita slamming her mug of hot chocolate down onto the table.

"That's it!" she shouted. Juno, Vespa, and Jet glanced at her in numb surprise. She glared at them.

"That's it!" she yelled again. "Mistah Steel, Mistah Jet, Miss Vespa, I'm sorry, but I'm just so sick of the moping!"

"Moping?" Vespa growled, a dangerous look in her eye.

Rita met her stare with equal force. "*Moping,*" she said, pointing an accusing finger at the three of them in turn. "Our family is missing, and I'm the only one who's been doing anything to help find them! Mistah Jet, you've barely spent five minutes away from the RUBY-7! Miss Vespa, you haven't said a nice word to anyone in a week! Mistah Steel, you've been so busy sitting on the couch that you haven't even been doing your *job, Mistah Ex-Detective,* and looking for them! I know you miss them, but haven't you ever thought that maybe I miss them too? You gotta help look for them! I've been juggling calls and meals and comfort all week, and I'm tired! So I'm not gonna do it by myself anymore."

Juno gritted his teeth. "It's not that simple."

"Well then *make* it that simple!" Rita yelled. She set her hands on her hips. "Look, I'm real sorry that you all have to go through this. It can't be a good feeling. I don't know what it's like to have your spouse go missing. But what I do know is what it's like to have your best friend go missing, *in case you forgot, boss,* and I know that we're the best fucking thieves in the whole galaxy. New Kinshasa wants to steal our family? Fine. *Let's steal them back.*"

"Oh, yeah?" said Juno. "How the hell are we gonna do that?"

“It’s not gonna be easy,” said Rita. “I’m not *sayin’* it’s gonna be easy. But we can do this. We just gotta figure out where they are, and then we figure out how to break in. We’ve done it a hundred times. We can do it now. They deserve us at our best, and right now, Mistah Steel, we ain’t at our best.”

Jet glanced up at them and spoke for the first time in a week. “Rita is correct,” he said. “We owe it to both of them. They have saved our lives countless times. Mourning will not save them. Planning will.”

“Yeah, that’s great,” said Juno, “except we’re missing, oh yeah, the person who plans *all of our missions.*”

“Not all of our missions,” Vespa grumbled. When Juno glanced at her, she raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t think Buddy came up with those all by herself, did you?”

Juno stared at her in disbelief, then looked to the others. “You don’t seriously think we can do this, right? Going up against the New Kinshasan government with all of our leaders in jail?”

“What the hell are you afraid of, Steel?” Vespa asked. “If we don’t do anything, they rot in prison and die. If we try and fail, they rot in prison and die. If we try and it works, they get to come home. What do we have to lose?”

“Look, boss,” said Rita. “I’ve been nice to you all week. I know you’re going through a tough time. I know this is hard, and I wish I could just let you feel it, but I can’t. I’ve seen you do this before, and we can’t do it now. You can’t help them if you let yourself go there. If it were different, you could have all the time you need to grieve, but Mistah Nureyev needs you right now, so you gotta be here with us, not in your head. I’m sorry.”

Juno let her eyes burn into him with all the fire and determination they could hold. It wasn’t enough to burn away the fog in his head, not really, but he could see it in her eyes — Peter needed him to be present and angry and smart, and he wasn’t that. Not then. But maybe he could be. He shoved his hands into his pockets and was surprised to feel his fingers brush against a familiar scrap of paper, one that he had forgotten was there. He pulled it out and unfolded it carefully, revealing a drawing of an eyepatch, or maybe a heart, or possibly another cat — it was always hard to tell with Peter. His voice caught in his throat.

“Okay,” said Juno. “Yeah. Okay. What’s the plan?”

Juno and Jet were down in the shooting range when Vespa rushed down the stairs, red-faced and breathless, and gasped that Peter and Buddy were on the news.

Rita had set up her usual circle of screens in the main room. On it, a reporter was solemnly describing the arrest and imprisonment of Peter Nureyev and Buddy Aurinko. Behind hir was a picture of Peter, Buddy, and Ruslan standing in a courtroom, each in an orange jumpsuit.

“The three rebel leaders were indicted earlier this morning. Judge Helicoid is expected to preside over their trial in the coming months. The leaders are being kept in an undisclosed location and are considered to be a security risk. Anyone with information about the Nureyevist movement is encouraged to contact the authorities and may be eligible for a cash reward.”

Bastards,” Vespa grunted. The screen switched to a close-up of Buddy, Peter, and Ruslan. They each looked exhausted but unharmed. Juno would have liked to feel relief at that, but after years in the HCPD, he knew a thousand ways to torture a person without ever leaving a mark. The image was still, but the way Peter held himself reminded Juno of the way he had limped during their time in Miasma’s custody. Juno sat delicately on the couch and fought against the panic that rose in his chest.

“I’ve got the courtroom on lock,” said Rita. “I’m watching the streets, trying to narrow down their location. There're only a couple of prisons in this system with the kind of security clearance they need for people that important. New Kinshasa will broadcast it when they get to trial. It’ll be good TV, too good to keep off of the streams.”

“It’s gonna be a sham trial,” said Juno.

“No shit, Steel,” said Vespa. “That’s why we’re getting them out of there.”

“I will contact Bartholemew,” said Jet.

"Bartholomew?" Juno asked.

Jet stared at him for a moment. "Bartholomew Mercury," he clarified.

You mean *Mick?*"

"Yes. His full name is Bartholomew."

"Since *when?*"

"Likely since birth, or since he underwent the legal process of changing his name," said Jet.

"Shit," said Juno. "How did I no know that?"

"Likely because 'Mick' and 'Bartholomew' sound nothing alike," said Jet. “I will see if the other leaders have a response to the news.”

Juno glanced over to where Rita was typing furiously. She looked calm and focused, the way she had on countless cases before. When she noticed him staring, she smiled.

“We’re gonna find them, you’ll see,” she said.

Juno nodded. “I know,” he said, and for the first time, he felt like they really could.

“How ya’ doing, Jay-Jay?” Mick asked.

They had met on the *Carte Blanche* to discuss new footage that had been released of Buddy speaking at a hearing. Rita had narrowed their location down to a maximum-security prison on Brahma’s largest moon and was working on determining where, exactly, they were being kept. Rita’s update had been heartening, but the footage hadn’t been; the dark circles under Buddy’s eyes had been worrying, but even more worrying was the cast on her arm. She had moved cautiously, and her beautiful red hair had been cut off, leaving only a dark uneven fuzz along her scalp that exposed the dead flesh around her eye, crossed with new and festering injuries. Vespa’s hands had been clenched into fists for the entire meeting.

Juno sighed. “Not great,” he said, “but I’m getting through it. Rita’s been a big help.”

Mick wrapped him in a tight hug. Juno tensed at first, unprepared, but let himself relax as Mick held him there. “I’m so sorry you have to go through this,” he said, and Juno felt tears pricking at the edges of his eyes.

“Yeah,” he said hoarsely.

“Mick,” said a voice from behind them, and Juno extricated himself from Mick’s embrace. It was Sasha, wearing her usual all-black ensemble and looking like she was planning about six murders in her head. She had stayed silent through the entire meeting, refusing to meet Juno’s eye, but now she stared directly at him.

“Right,” said Mick. “Sorry, Jay-Jay. We gotta get going.”

“It’s cool,” said Juno. “I’ll see you both soon.”

Sasha nodded to him and grabbed Mick’s arm to pull him along beside her. Then she stopped, turned, and said, "Thanks for getting him out of there. We're going to do whatever we can to get them out of that prison. I promise."

Juno nodded, feeling the tears well up in his eyes. "Thanks," he said. "That means a lot."

"We're family, Juno," she said. "It means everything."

He watched them go, then took a deep breath and walked back toward Rita’s room.

Juno took a deep breath as Cecil Kanagawa applied the last bit of glitter to Juno’s eye.

“There!” he said. “Oh, Junebug, you look breathtaking!”

Juno grunted in response. Beside him, Vespa was fighting off the unfortunate stylist that had been tasked with her makeup. Juno stifled a laugh.

“Not funny, Steel,” Vespa grumbled when they walked away. Juno just grinned, then realized it was the first time he had smiled in weeks, which felt like a punch to the gut. He stopped smiling almost

instantly. Vespa, to her credit, didn't say anything.

By the time Cassandra had finally gathered them and arranged them in front of the cameras, Juno's stomach was rolling with nerves. He picked at a piece of skin by his left thumbnail and tried to keep the fear off of his face.

"Ready?" Cassandra asked. Juno nodded. Pollux gave him a thumbs-up from behind the camera.

"Okay," said Cassandra. "Let's begin."

Juno and Vespa spent four hours recording that day. It began with a short statement from each of them about the state of the war, then progressed to an in-depth interview about their relationships with Peter and Buddy. Juno fought to keep his frustration at acceptable levels; he didn't want to be sharing his private business for the entire system to see, but the footage would be edited and aired to serve as a coded message for another attack, and Cassandra had guessed that their stories about New Kinshasa's injustice would inspire the rebels for another successful attack.

When Cassandra asked how he felt about losing Peter, though, Juno could only shake his head. "I can't," he said, voice breaking, and Cass glared at him.

"You have to." she said, "If you want him back, tell me how it felt to watch them take him."

So Juno did. He spilled his fear and his anger and his sadness, and then Vespa did, too, and the whole time Juno kept one hand clenched around the arm of his chair. When they were finished, Cass gave him a nod.

"Good job, you two," she said. Juno didn't say a word.

Vespa cornered him at the end of the first month without Peter. She pulled Juno silently toward the med bay and sat him down, her expression grim.

"Look, Steel," she said, "I'm sorry to do this, but you need to make a

decision."

Juno took a deep breath. He had been resolutely ignoring the fact that he was pregnant for the entire month. Making a decision either way seemed impossible; the one person he wanted to talk to was gone, and though Juno had tried to tell himself Peter would be back, he knew there was a not-insignificant chance that Peter would die in that prison before they ever had the chance to make a plan.

"I know," he said. "Fuck. I know."

Vespa sat silently while Juno thought. The most obvious answer was to end it — Peter was gone, and Juno didn't have the first clue about being a parent. It wasn't like he'd had parenting modeled to him all that well, and while he'd largely overcome his fears about becoming Sarah Steel, this was a whole new ball game. He didn't want any kids to suffer the way he and Benten had, especially not at his hand. Even beyond Sarah's less-than-stellar parenting, there was the possibility that Peter wouldn't come back, and Juno had seen firsthand the difficulties of being a single parent. Who was he to inflict that possibility on a child?

There was something in him, though, that wanted this, wanted it so badly that it hurt. He imagined the conversation he could have had with Peter, had things gone a little differently. The idea of settling down somewhere and making a new family together was so wonderful that it ached. He pictured lazy mornings, out in a little house somewhere, and waking up next to Peter. He imagined waking the kids up — *kids,* as if they could decide to have more, if they wanted to, kids who might love each other as much as Juno had loved Ben, who might be able to have a decent and healthy relationship in the absence of Sarah's abuse and neglect — and making breakfast, imagined Peter entertaining them with stories, complete with character voices, and all of them settling down for movie nights. He imagined the rest of his family coming to visit — would Buddy take them out for ice cream? Would Vespa patch up their scraped knees with a kiss? Would Jet tuck them into bed at night? Would Rita play pretend with them for hours, acting out their favorite streams?

Juno tried to picture that same future without Peter and Buddy. It hurt more than anything, but there was still a brightness to it, a future for Juno to protect. He imagined losing Peter and ending the pregnancy, and the thought was so terrifying that he almost couldn't stand it. His mind flitted to the woman he had met in the rebel hospital, the dull look in her eyes that had shocked him to the core. It

was barely even a choice.

“I think,” said Juno, the words sounding like they came from a mile off, “I’m going to keep it.”

“You sure?” Vespa asked.

Juno nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I am.”

Vespa let out a puff of breath. “Okay,” she said. “I’m with you every step of the way.”

Juno glanced up at her and laughed. “I’m terrified,” he said, like it had been forced out of him, like a punch to the gut, like the words escaping without his input.

“That’s okay, Steel,” said Vespa. She smiled a little, uncertain and bashful. Juno took it as a comfort. “I am, too.”

The trial began that night. It was streamed live, which meant that Juno sat between Jet and Rita and watched as the love of his life was brought out, shackled and bruised, in real time. Juno twisted his fingers in Rita’s cardigan in an attempt to stay silent.

Juno largely ignored the opening arguments. Peter, Buddy, and Ruslan had been given a defense lawyer, but Juno doubted it would do any good; this was a political trial, pure and simple, and the best Juno could hope for was a life sentence for each of them, which would give the crew of the *Carte Blanche* time to rescue them. The prosecution dashed that hope; they were pushing for public execution. Juno grit his teeth to keep from screaming.

Jet must have noticed his tension, because he placed a large hand on Juno’s shoulder. “Do not worry,” he said quietly. “We will get them out soon.”

Juno nodded. “I know,” he said, and tried to believe it.

Khabib came to the next big meeting. Juno refused to look at them. They refused to speak.

When the group of rebel leaders had disbanded, Juno followed Khabib toward their car. It was quiet on the base. The capture of the three most important people to the Nureyevist movement had quieted a lot of the enthusiasm that Juno had seen even a couple of months earlier. It was eerie and disheartening, and Juno tried not to take it to heart.

Khabib arrived at the car and turned to face Juno, who had buried his hands in his pockets. They stood that way for a moment before finally breaking the silence.

“Why are you here?” they asked. They sounded as exhausted as Juno felt.

Juno fiddled with the small scrap of paper in his pocket. “Did Ruslan sell them out?” he asked quietly.

Khabib laughed. “Really? That’s what you wanted to ask me?” When Juno nodded, they shook their head. “This is stupid. You won’t believe me either way.”

“Did she sell them out?” he asked again. “Did she tell them where the meeting would be, and when?”

You idiot,” said Khabib. “What the hell do you think? She got captured, too.”

Khabib let out a noise that was half a laugh and half a sob. Juno recognized it from every night he had awoken from a nightmare to find that Peter was gone, from every time that Rita had held him while he shook. It was the sound of a person barely holding themselves together. It was the sound of a grief and a fear that could kill someone stone dead if they weren’t careful.

“Okay,” said Juno. “I believe you.”

“I don't understand why you don't trust her. All she wants is for Brahma to be free. She grew up here. Her father *died* because of New Kinshasa. This whole time, you've been looking at her like a threat. Why can't you see her as an ally?"

Juno sighed. "I don't know," he said. "I guess I just haven't met a lot of people with good intentions."

Khabib scoffed. "They followed you into that building, you know. If any of us isn't trustworthy, it's you."

"I do," said Juno. "I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry, every single day. I know I can't ever make that right."

"As long as you know," said Khabib, with anger in every word. "You owe Ruslan an apology, when you see her again."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Juno. He watched as Khabib climbed into their car and pulled away from the base.

He realized, hours later, that it was the only full conversation they'd ever had.

Two weeks later, Juno stepped into the med bay. Rita held his hand with a quiet confidence, stable and steady. She wasn't who he wanted with him, exactly, but he was glad she was coming with him anyway.

Vespa pressed buttons on a machine and lowered a screen onto Juno's stomach, which had only recently started to look any bigger than it normally did. The change made Juno uncomfortable and nervous. He avoided looking down as Vespa adjusted the screen. Instantly, it lit up with clear black and white, though Juno couldn't make out anything specific at his angle. Vespa continued to press buttons until she was satisfied, then turned the screen until Juno could see it.

"Congratulations," she said. "They're perfectly healthy." On the screen were two small figures, not-quite-human yet, curled closely together. Juno took one look at them and burst into tears.

Rita wrapped an arm around him and pressed his face into her neck. Juno shook as all the joy and grief he could possibly contain surged through him.

When he was finished crying, Vespa gave him a serious look. "Does this change anything for you?"

Juno shook his head. "I haven't changed my mind," he said, his voice still thick with tears. "I want to keep them."

All right. Let's talk about it, then."

She gave Juno an overview of the care plan for the next few months. Juno's hand remained tight in Rita's the entire time. When Vespa was finished, Juno glanced up at Rita.

"Would you tell Jet for me?" he asked. "I don't— I can't—"

"No problem, boss," said Rita. She kissed him on the forehead. "I'm proud of what you're doin' here, kid."

Juno sat and pulled his sweater down when Vespa had moved the machine. Rita stayed with him until he nodded to her to leave, and then she flounced out of the room, clearly excited to share the big news. Juno let his gaze flick up toward Vespa, who was busying herself with cleaning the machine.

"How are you holding up?" Juno asked.

Vespa snorted. "You don't have to give me a whole heart-to-heart," Vespa said. "I'm doing about the same as you. Don't worry about it."

"Of course I worry about it," said Juno. "You're family."

Vespa sat back on her work bench and sighed. She pushed her too-long hair out of her eyes, revealing the grey-brown roots that had crept nearly halfway down each strand. "Yeah," she said, without meeting his eye. "Yeah, I worry about you, too."

"We're gonna get through this," said Juno, because there was nothing else to say.

"I just didn't want to lose her again," Vespa replied. Her voice broke on the last word.

"You didn't," said Juno. "We didn't lose them. We're going to get them back. I swear."

"I know. I know. And I'm sure as fuck not giving them up without a fight."

Juno laughed, a bittersweet sound that did little to make him feel any less like he was lying. "See? They don't stand a chance."

Vespa nodded and chuckled a bit too, just as roughly as Juno had. "You're all set, Steel," she said. Juno took her words as the dismissal they were and headed for the door. On the way out, he glanced back at her one last time. She had slumped forward and buried her face in

her hands. She was shaking with what Juno suspected were sobs, kept inside by sheer force of will.

He closed the door as quietly as he could.

The trial had dragged on for nearly two months by the time Judge Helicoid finally gave his verdict. The remains of the Aurinko crime family gathered around Rita's screens and held each other as it was read.

"Buddy Aurinko, Peter Nureyev, and Ruslan Altair, I sentence you to death by public hanging."

It wasn't a surprise, but a cold pit of fear opened in Juno's belly anyway. Rita squeezed his hand. Vespa let out a small noise, and Juno wrapped his arm around her. To his surprise, she didn't shrug him off.

"This sentence will be served in exactly one week. Do you understand your sentence as it has been read to you?" Judge Helicoid asked in the same bored monotone he had used for the entire trial.

In answer, Peter spit at his feet.

The last image of his husband that Juno saw was Peter being dragged away, his face twisted in fury. Ruslan was stony and silent, while Buddy screamed with all the rage and frustration and pain that Juno knew she and Vespa shared. He shook with that same anger and fear, even knowing that they had a plan in place.

"We will save them," Jet said, repeating the mantra to which they had all held for two hellish months. "In one week, they will be with us, and they will be safe."

Juno believed him because he didn't know what else to do. He let Rita drag him to bed and laid awake for hours, his mind cycling through the same images it always picked these days: Peter, chained and shocked. Peter, wiping the blood from Juno's cheek. Peter, shoved into the back of a cop car.

Like every night, Juno went to bed scared and woke up screaming.

[image]

Chapter End Notes

Art by noir-martian (on Tumblr) aka @random_jocelyn (on twitter)

Beta'd by looking-for-destroya (bigmcworm on ao3)

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In which Juno saves the day

Chapter Summary

Just as Juno tensed for conflict, a woman's shriek pierced the air.

"Traitors!" she screamed, and then, chaos.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: blood and injury, police violence (PLEASE be careful with this! This may not normally be a trigger for you, but with what's going on in MN right now, consider whether you might want to take a few days/weeks before reading this chapter. Justice for George Floyd, and if you can, please consider donating to a bail fund in a city near you or going out to protest. If you go out to protest, cover your face/tattoos, write the name of a bail fund on your arm, have a buddy (even once you've left the protest!), and stay safe. Black lives fucking matter!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Juno shoved his hands in his pockets, running his fingers along the handle of his blaster.

"I'm in position," said Khabib over the comms.

"That makes all of us," said Castor. He and Pollux were positioned somewhere to Juno's left. He'd seen them for a second as they headed for the crowd; Castor had given him a thumbs-up, and Pollux had smiled and signed "Good luck." Juno had to hope they wouldn't need it.

"Gotcha," said Juno. He rolled his shoulders and subtly adjusted the comms unit so that he could hear more clearly over the murmur of the crowd. It was small and disguised as a silver ear cuff. He had picked it out of Peter's jewelry box that morning. He buried his hands in the pockets of his dark coat and pushed through a layer of spectators, using his elbows to move between two larger figures in front of him. "Shit, why do so many people want to watch an execution?"

"Guess they don't get much entertainment these days," said Khabib. Their voice, in its eternal monotone, was a comfort to Juno. He

doubted he could feel as calm as they sounded, even on a good day. Then again, they were probably freaking out as much as he was; for both of them, this was their only chance to save the people they loved.

The crowd had formed in a large circle around a large platform, leaving only a small gap that led to the door through which Peter, Buddy, and Ruslan would be led. On the platform was a government official who was examining a lever on the right side of the stage. When pulled, it would release the trap door below the three nooses that hung above the platform. Execution by public hanging was an ancient affair, but clearly the New Kinshasan government was feeling nostalgic; this was how Peter, Buddy, and Ruslan were supposed to die. Juno was not going to let that happen.

He elbowed his way through another layer of people, cursing his short stature and the fact that Vespa had officially forbidden him from wearing a nice tall pair of platforms.

“You’re pregnant, stupid,” she had said. He had rolled his eyes but accepted without complaint, instead bundling himself in as many layers as possible in an attempt to shield himself from the crowd. He had wrapped one of Peter’s scarves around his neck, hoping it would make him feel safer. Instead, the spicy scent of Peter’s perfume just reminded him of the very real danger that his husband would not make it home alive.

The gentle murmur around him faded as the door at the opposite end of the courtyard opened. A small army walked through it, surrounding three figures who had been covered with dark black hoods. Juno pushed forward, filled with something that felt a little like hope and a lot like terror. His heart beat out *Peter, Peter, Peter,* and he followed it forward, paying no mind to the people around him. In the corner of his vision, Vespa was doing the same, and Mick was, too, on the other side of the crowd. All around him, Nureyevists slipped through the crowd, ready to step in. Juno willed them all forward, his hand tightening around the blaster in his pocket.

The New Kinshasan official walked to the center of the platform and began reading out the charges against Peter, Ruslan, and Buddy. Juno tuned him out, instead focusing on the distance that still separated him from the gallows. Vespa was nearly at the edge of the crowd; as the man droned on about New Kinshasa’s power, she was jostled by the restless people around her. The air was thick with anticipation, and the man’s words were only increasing the tension. The crowd wanted blood, and it wanted it soon.

As soon as the thought occurred to him, a scuffle broke out between Vespa and a man she had pushed past on her way toward the gallows. It was small, at first, but then others nearby joined in. Someone shouted, and it was enough to finally pull the official's attention away from his droning speech. A couple of guards waded their way into the crowd. Juno strained to push forward, but the fight only grew.

Juno took advantage of the distraction to push forward again, but he was still a couple hundred feet from the gallows, which was surrounded by a layer of armed guards. Some of the others were closer, but now the fight was getting large enough that the guards were getting tense. One of them tightened his hand on his weapon. His eyes met Juno's through the crowd.

Just as Juno tensed for conflict, a woman's shriek pierced the air.

"Traitors!" she screamed, and then, chaos.

The official began beckoning to the rest of the guards to pull the prisoners back inside. In the confusion, Buddy managed to elbow one in the side and sprint away, pulling her hood off in one smooth motion. The Nureyevists on the other side of the crowd were ready to pull her away, even as she strained to get to Vespa in the middle of the fight. Ruslan was pulled back toward the door, but another Nureyevist managed to pull the guard off of her, and within seconds, she had disappeared into the crowd. People screamed and tried to pull away from or jump into the fight, leaving Juno amidst a swirling mass of bodies, struggling to keep his footing. He kept his eyes locked on Peter.

Peter, for his part, was struggling against the guard, who had, in the confusion, pulled the both of them onto the platform. In the struggle, Peter managed to shrug off his hood; underneath, his jaw was bruised, and his cheekbones were more prominent than Juno had ever seen him. His eyes looked sunken, but they were full of fire and fury, even as the guard hurled him toward the noose. His hair was unwashed and loose, swinging around his face in a dark curtain streaked with grey. The moment Juno saw his face, he *ached.*

The official was screaming something at the guard, now. Juno took advantage of a gap in the crowd and sprinted forward. The guard dragged Peter closer to the noose. Juno's heart dropped into his stomach.

The guard managed to haul Peter on top of the trapdoor below the

noose while the official forced the noose around his neck. Peter spit in the official's face, struggling against his bonds, but Juno could see how much weaker he had become in the months since his capture; he wasn't going to be able to escape. The crowd closed around Juno again, but he kept throwing himself forward, trying desperately to reach the platform and do something — *anything* — before it was too late.

The official reached for the lever that would open the trapdoor, and all Juno could think was *too late.*

Time slowed. The official's hand grasped the lever. Juno raised his blaster without thinking, taking panicked aim, but that wouldn't be enough. The official would fall on the lever, and it would release, and Peter would die. The guard was shielded by Peter's body; there was no way Juno could hit one without hitting the other. Peter was going to fall. Peter was going to *fall.*

Focus.

The rope, then. The rope was too far away for Juno to tell what, exactly, it was made of, but it was too late to worry about whether this would work. It would have to be a clean shot, right through the rope, and then Peter would fall but he wouldn't *die,* and that was all that mattered. A clean shot, and Peter would be safe. A clean shot, and Peter could come home.

Juno Steel, Private Eye would have been able to do it in a heartbeat. Juno Steel, Private One-Eye wasn't so sure. The rope was a thin line across the center of his vision, barely visible, much less a target. He couldn't hit it, even with a year of training with Jet. He couldn't hit it with a thousand years' training with Jet. He could have hit it with the THEIA, but there was no time to think about that. He wasn't good enough. He could hit Peter. He could miss. He couldn't hit the rope. He *couldn't.*

He had to.

The official yanked the lever up, and the doors began to open. Peter's eyes swept up toward the crowd, wide and afraid. They met Juno's. The crowd around Juno faded, and his vision narrowed until Peter was all he could see. Peter's gaze was a tether, anchoring Juno to the present, and Juno clung to it for dear life. With all the anger and grief of months of separation and here, the sick joke of their long-awaited reunion at the end of all things, Peter's lips formed Juno's name, his

whisper lost among the deafening roar of the crowd. Peter began to descend as the trapdoor fell from beneath him. Juno's gaze snapped up to the rope once more. He let out a steadying breath and squeezed the trigger.

Peter fell.

The rope snapped, and time rushed back to Juno. Peter hit the ground with a dull thud. Juno sprinted the rest of the way forward, reaching Peter as he pushed himself to his knees, and hitched his arms under Peter's shoulders. There was no time to wonder at the feeling of having Peter back in his arms — the guards had opened fire, filling the air with the deafening pops and zaps of lasers, and they were surrounded by screams. He hauled Peter to his feet and pulled him, as quickly as he could, away from the gallows, away from the guards and the officials and the men who wanted his husband *dead,* and back into the crowd, doing his best to cover him.

"Juno," Peter muttered. Juno pulled him close.

It was complete and utter chaos. Juno kept an iron grip around Peter's waist as they went. Juno pulled a laser cutter from his pocket and sliced the bonds around Peter's hands. Peter reached up and ripped the remains of the noose from his neck, hands shaking.

They made it about fifty feet before the first guard caught up to them.

Juno only had a half-second of warning; Peter made a small noise, and then there were hands trying to tear them apart. Juno swung wildly. His fist made contact with the guard's nose, and they staggered backwards.

"Always did have a good right hook," Juno quipped. Peter stood beside him, ready to fight. He was clutching the plasma cutter in his hand so tightly that his knuckles had turned white. Juno stepped forward.

When the guard attacked again, Juno dodged, then managed to hook his arms around their waist and shove them toward the ground. Before they could get back up, he pulled out his blaster and stunned them. He turned to grab Peter again, but Peter was too busy throwing another guard off-balance, stabbing him in the side with the plasma cutter and shoving him to the ground. Juno whirled as another guard came at them, blaster raised.

"It's nice to see you again," Peter shouted. Juno fired off another stun.

“Yeah, I missed you,” Juno replied. He fired off another two shots. “How’re you holding up?”

Peter grunted behind Juno. Juno spared himself a half-second to turn and check that Peter was all right; he was rewarded with a face-full of blood as Peter stabbed another guard. “I’ve been okay,” Peter said breezily, though his voice was still weak. He rolled his shoulder and winced. “Room service was terrible, and the mattress was stiff. I don’t think my back’s been this bad in years, and I’m exhausted. Juno, dear, I’m very glad to be leaving.”

“I’m glad, too,” said Juno, whirling around to kick at another guard as she approached. “Had to fight for it, though. Vespa barely let me off the Carte Blanche, but I said, ‘Hey, that’s my *husband*—’”

Peter frowned, punching someone in the face. “What do you mean, she barely let you off the *Carte Blanche?*”

Juno’s mind went blank. “Uhh,” he said, and then ducked to allow Peter to roll over his back and stab another guard. “Nothing? I don’t mean anything. Forget I said anything. It’s fine.”

“Juno, is something wrong?” Peter asked. He pressed against Juno’s side.

“Nothing’s wrong!” Juno squeaked. “Absolutely nothing’s wrong. I’m fine.”

“Are you hurt?”

“No!”

“Are you sick?”

“Nope!”

“Juno, if you’re sick, you need to tell me—”

“Look, I can just tell you back on the ship—”

“— because I just want to know you’re safe—”

“— because I don’t want to freak you out—”

“— and I don’t want you to have risked yourself for me, Juno, this is dangerous enough—”

“— it’s *kiiiiiinda* not the best time—”

“Juno, just *tell me!*”

“I’m pregnant!” Juno yelled.

Peter froze. Juno stared back at him, watched as fear and understanding and — horror? Was that *horror?* — dawned on his face.

“You’re *what?*” Peter rasped.

Behind him, a guard raised her blaster. Juno raised his in return and screamed “DUCK!”

Peter dropped to the ground in an instant, and Juno hit the guard with a stunning shot to the chest. She fell, and Juno reached an arm down to help Peter to his feet.

“See?” he said, trying to keep his voice as light as possible. “This is why I wanted to tell you *on the ship.*”

“I see your point,” said Peter, struggling to his feet. “I really think we should hurry back, don’t you?”

The crowd was thinning around them, scared off by the pile of unconscious guards they had formed. Juno nodded and latched his arm around Peter once more, pulling the two of them back to the *Carte Blanche,* which Jet had parked a few streets away, along with half of the Nureyevists’ ships. They managed to avoid any more skirmishes along the way, stumbling through back alleys until they were back — until they were *home.*

Juno helped Peter through the door and guided him to one of the kitchen stools. Peter collapsed on it shakily, pulling Juno closer to him; it was becoming more and more obvious how exhausted and hurt Peter truly was, and Juno wrapped him up in an embrace, pressing his lips to Peter’s forehead.

“I love you,” Peter gasped. “I missed you. God, Juno, I missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” Juno muttered. He closed his eyes and inhaled the smell of Peter’s dirty, sweaty hair, and it was enough to bring tears to his eyes. “Shit. I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“I thought of you every night. I worried about you, too, and about the others—”

“It’s okay,” Juno said, rubbing one hand across Peter’s shoulders. “It’s okay. We’re all safe. Rita kept us all going, and — Shit, Peter, she kept *me* going. I slept in her room every night. She kept us from falling apart, and she came up with the plan to save you. Well, her and Mick. I still can’t believe *Mick* is part of this stupid rebellion.”

Peter let out a breathy laugh. “I’m glad,” he said. “I’m glad they took care of you.”

“I wish someone could have taken care of you, though,” said Juno, voice breaking.

“No, darling, it’s all right,” said Peter, as Juno finally let out a sob. “No, it was all right. I’m here. I’m alive. You saved me. Juno, dear, I’m right here with you now. You did it.”

“Sorry,” said Juno, pulling back just enough to wipe a hand across his cheeks. “Sorry, I shouldn’t be crying, I know—”

There were tears shining in Peter’s eyes, too. “It’s all right,” he said softly. He ran one hand down Juno’s arm. “It’s all right.”

“I wanted to tell you,” Juno burst out. “I found out the day you were taken, and I wanted to tell you, but then we all got caught up in that *stupid* meeting, and that *stupid* argument, and then I ran into that building and they caught you, and I couldn’t tell you, and then you were gone and I had to figure out what to do, so I decided to keep the stupid pregnancy because I didn’t know if we could save you or not, didn’t know if it was gonna be my only chance to have a family with you, and yeah, I know, ‘Juno’s got a habit of killing her kids,’ but I thought maybe I could do it, even if something happened to you, but it was horrible to even think about, and I— and I—”

Juno’s voice broke off into sobs. He wrapped Peter in his arms again. The two of them held each other for a while, just breathing together and muttering soft, comforting words. Juno let himself relax for the first time in months, and he felt Peter doing the same, the two of them a tangle of fear that was finally unraveling. It was all Juno could do not to scream.

When Juno had calmed down enough to really speak again, he pulled back just far enough to look Peter directly in the eye.

“Look,” he said, his voice hoarse from crying. “I love you. I love you, and I married you, and that’s important to me. But it’s also important to me that you know that I’m not trying to tie you down to kids, not if

you don't want them. I know we never really talked about a family, and I know I couldn't ask you if you wanted one when I decided to keep the pregnancy. If you can't be part of this, I understand, and it's okay."

Peter frowned. "Juno," he whispered, and then let out a huff of laughter. "Juno, if you think I'd ever leave you, you're an even bigger fool than I am."

"I'm serious," said Juno. "I don't wanna make you be a parent if it's not what you want. I had a parent who didn't know how to love her kids, and it sucked. I'm not going to do that to them, and I'm not going to do it to you."

"Juno, darling, I'm all in," said Peter. He rested his forehead against Juno's. "There is nothing in this universe that could make me leave you, not on purpose, and I can think of nothing I'd love more than building a family with you. I love you. I'm not going anywhere."

Juno smiled. "Neither am I," he said. He leaned forward and kissed Peter with all the love and pain and longing he had felt since their last kiss, all those months ago. Peter's lips were warm and dry, and his body was bony against Juno's, so fragile after months of abuse. Juno wanted nothing more than to wrap Peter up in a blanket and make him feel safe, the way Peter so often made him feel.

Instead, he pulled back once more. "The others should be back soon," he muttered.

"Where are they?" Peter asked.

Right on cue, Rita burst into the kitchen, then sprinted for Peter and wrapped her arms around him. "Mistah Nureyev!" she shouted. "You're back!"

Peter chuckled. "Yeah," he muttered. "I'm back. Thank you for watching over Juno while I was gone."

"It's no problem, Mistah Nureyev. Just don't let it happen again."

"I'll try not to," said Peter. He squeezed her shoulder.

"Congratulations on your return," said a booming voice from behind them. Jet stepped into the kitchen and gave Peter a look that, for once, didn't resemble a glare. "I am glad to see that you are safe."

“Thank you, Jet,” said Peter. Rita let him go, and Peter gave Jet a small smile.

There was a small commotion at the door. Juno turned to see Vespa limping through the door, Buddy’s arm around her waist.

“Miss Buddy! Miss Vespa!” Rita shouted. She tackled the two of them in a tight bear hug. Juno could have sworn their feet lifted off the ground.

“Hello, darlings,” said Buddy. Her voice was hoarse but strong. “I hope you’ve been making lots of trouble while I’ve been gone.”

Juno grinned. “I think we managed,” he said. “It’s good to see you.”

Jet crossed the room and wrapped Buddy in an embrace, which she returned with near-skeletal arms. Vespa limped to the stool next to Juno and sat, a look of quiet satisfaction on her face.

“You good?” Juno muttered.

Vespa nodded. “Tripped on a body,” she said. “It’s just twisted. Not a big deal. How’s Nureyev?”

Juno glanced over at Peter, who was resting his head on his arm and smiling to himself. “Hey, honey?”

Peter looked up. “Hmm?”

“How’re you feeling?”

Peter’s gaze moved to Vespa, then back. He shrugged. “I’d like some food,” he said, “and a lot of sleep. But I’m all right, Vespa, really. Thank you.”

“I’m taking a look at both of you before you go to sleep,” Vespa grumbled. “I wanted to look at Ruslan, too, but they took her back to Mick’s ship.”

“So she’s safe?” Juno asked. When Vespa nodded, he let out a sigh of relief.

Peter suppressed a yawn, and Juno leaned back against him. “What do you say, Nureyev? You ready for a shower?”

“*Ugh,* yes. Juno, I have to tell you, the facilities in prison were sub-par, to say the least. Barbaric, really. No hot water, and the water

pressure was *terrible.*"

"Did you tell him?" Vespa asked, keeping her voice low as though it would stop Peter from hearing.

Peter laughed. "Yes, Vespa, he told me. I suppose it's good that you lumped all of the surprises together: first, that I didn't have to die, and second, that we're having a child."

"*Weeeeell,*" said Juno, his voice rising, "Uh, I'm not so sure I got them all out."

Peter frowned. "What?"

Juno let out a nervous laugh. "Uh, well, it's not just a kid, Nureyev. It's twins. There's two."

Peter stared for a moment, then let out a long, long breath. "Oh," he said, his voice strained. "Is that all?"

"Is that okay?"

"Of course it's okay, Juno, I haven't changed my mind, it's just… twins?"

"I… guess they run in the family?"

"Evidently, yes."

Vespa snorted. "You're morons," she said. "Glad you're back safe, Nureyev. Go get a shower and get your ass to the med bay."

Peter, who had gone very pale, nodded. "Right," he said. "Well, Juno, I say we get a shower and go wait in the med bay. I believe I need to lie down."

That night, after Vespa had patched everyone up and Juno had cooked a fantastic dinner for everyone, they made their way back to their room. It was the first time Juno had set foot in the room since Peter had been kidnapped, and from the way Peter's breathing quickened, he suspected Peter could tell. The bed was as unmade as it had been for months, and a fine layer of dust had settled on the dresser.

“Oh, Juno,” Peter breathed. Juno shook his head.

“Only happy stuff tonight, Nureyev,” he said firmly. “The rest can wait.”

He watched as Peter took a deep breath and set his shoulders, pushing the anger and hurt back to be dealt with later, and Juno paused.

“I mean,” he said, “if you need to talk about it now, we can. Sorry. I just… I thought maybe you would want to have a good night’s sleep before that happened.”

Peter smiled sadly. “I would,” he said, “but I rather think I won’t get to. Juno, what would you have done if I had died?”

The breath went out of Juno with a whine, and he sat on the edge of the bed. “I don’t know,” he gasped. “I don’t know. I couldn’t let myself think like that.”

Peter sat beside him and kissed his cheek, then wrapped Juno in his long, slender arms. “It’s all right,” he muttered, the same thing the two of them had been muttering back and forth all night. “It’s all right, Juno. I’m here.”

“I know,” said Juno. He took a couple of deep breaths, then leaned closer. “I would have survived it, first of all,” he said. “I would have survived you dying. I wouldn’t have let myself go that far.”

Peter kissed his forehead. “I’m glad.”

“I would have relied on the others a lot, I think. Would have tried to take care of Vespa, if Buddy was still gone, or let them all take care of me. I don’t know. I thought about what it would take to raise two kids without you, and it hurt, but I have other family. We would have all made it out okay.” Juno turned and pressed his face to Peter’s neck, felt Peter’s pulse against the bridge of his nose. “I didn’t like to think about it beyond that. I just missed you, and I kept telling myself I’d see you soon, because I didn’t know what else to do.”

“I understand,” said Peter. “I told myself the same thing every night. I told myself I would wake up and you would be there, laying next to me, and it would have all been fixed somehow, and that we would all be okay. I would concentrate *so hard* on the way you looked in the morning — your hair all messy, and your hands clutching the blankets the way you do when it’s cold, and how you would have moved closer to me in the night, how sometimes you would rest your head on my

shoulder. I could feel you beside me, if I concentrated hard enough. I thought maybe if I concentrated even harder, it could come true."

"It did," Juno said. "It will. You'll wake up tomorrow and I'll be right here. Or, well, okay, I might be in the bathroom. You don't want me puking on you. Morning sickness is the *worst*. But I swear I'll be here all night, and I swear you'll see me when you wake up."

"I know," Peter breathed. "I know. Thank you, Juno. It was a magnificent shot, you know."

"You know I used to be the best shot on Mars," Juno said, grinning against Peter's neck.

Peter kissed his forehead again, then his cheek, and then pulled Juno closer. "I never thought I'd be a father," he said absently.

Juno snorted. "Listen, being a parent wasn't exactly on my bucket list, either," he said. "But neither was becoming a galactically-renowned criminal, so hey, guess it's not the most surprising thing I could do."

"Do you think we can do it?" Peter asked. Juno looked up, and Peter looked almost scared. Juno thought briefly back to the moment when he had first told Peter, and the horror that had dawned on his face, and understood.

"Yeah," Juno whispered. He wrapped his arm around Peter's waist and squeezed. "Yeah, Nureyev, I really think we can."

Peter let out a long breath. "Okay," he said. "Okay, Juno. Let's have a baby."

Juno poked him in the side. "Two babies, idiot," he said.

Peter chuckled. "Let's have two babies, then."

Juno sat up. "I have names," he said suddenly. "Uh, if you want to hear them. I wanted to wait for you, but then I thought of names, and I thought… Well, uh, anyway. I have them. If you want them."

Peter smiled. "Of course I'd like to hear them," he said.

So Juno told him.

They slept wrapped in each other that night. Before Juno's consciousness faded, he heard Peter yawn beside him.

"What you said, about Juno killing her children," he started, and then he pressed his lips to Juno's forehead. "Darling, for the record, I think you're going to be a wonderful parent."

The creaking of the *Carte Blanche* carried them off to sleep, and when they awoke, they awoke together.

Breakfast the next morning was a slow, lazy affair. Buddy and Vespa were the last ones to arrive, clutching each other like lifeboats. Rita was full of her usual energy, but now it was tinged with joy rather than the desperate determination of the last few months. Jet exchanged a few warm words with all of them, including Peter, which left Peter with a dazed and happy expression on his face that carried him through breakfast. Juno managed to avoid laughing, but it was a near thing.

After they had eaten, Rita piled them all on the couch to discuss the previous day's mission.

"So obviously we got Miss Buddy and Mistah Nureyev back," she began, grinning from ear to ear, "and we also got Miss Ruslan back to her ship. I got word back from Mx. Khabib this morning that they're both okay, and that everyone else on their end made it back alive. We didn't lose any of our people, and only a couple of soldiers actually died — most of 'em just got sent to the hospital, which is nice."

"More than they deserved," Vespa grumbled.

"So what's the next step, then, darling?" asked Buddy.

"Well that's the thing, Miss Buddy," said Rita. "See, we weren't just getting you guys out, although that was definitely the most important part of the mission, and I'm real glad you're all safe. It's nice to have you all back, and I got a *bunch* of streams to catch you up on, and also all kinds of gossip, but that ain't important! I mean, okay, it's important, but this is also important! Part of the mission yesterday was to create a diversion for another, more *seeeecret* mission that Mistah Jet and I were workin' on the whole time!"

Peter frowned. "You weren't overseeing the rescue?"

Rita shrugged. “I was keeping an eye on Mistah Steel and Miss Vespa, obviously, but I wasn’t in charge or anything. I was busy hacking into the New Kinshasan government and publishing a whole bunch of classified files about all their weapons and deals with other governments and all that kinda stuff. Plus, while I did that, Mistah Jet was leading a mission into one of their big important buildings on the surface, and Miss Sasha was leading another one into *another* big important building, and a bunch of other people were rioting, and basically we *miiiiiight* have overthrown the whole government last night?”

There was a moment where all of them sat in stunned silence and processed Rita’s words. Sure, Juno had known that there were other missions going on during the rescue, but he had never paid much attention to those; he had been too busy worrying about Peter to think about the bigger picture.

But if it had really gone that well…

“Does that mean it’s over?” Vespa asked.

Rita shrugged. “I mean, maybe not all the way,” she said. “It’s pretty much over, though. All we gotta do now is make sure they don’t get power back for a looooooong time. I think Mistah Mercury’s gonna run for president? I don’t know. But yeah, we won!”

Juno let out a sharp bark of laughter. All of that, and it had ended while he hadn’t even been looking.

There were tears forming in Peter’s eyes, so Juno kissed him, slow and sweet. When they broke apart, Buddy and Vespa were embracing, both of them shaking with emotion. Even Jet was smiling, and Rita was standing in front of them, arms akimbo, looking very proud.

“Rita, darling, you’re a born leader,” said Buddy, her voice wet with emotion.

“Nah,” said Rita. “I’m just real good with computers. And anyway, somebody had to deal with the family while you were gone. I couldn’t just let them all sit around and mope.”

“You’re absolutely right,” said Buddy. “Thank you.”

Rita’s expression softened. “Aww, Miss Buddy,” she said, “you’re so sweet. I missed ya.”

“Hey,” said Vespa. “We just won a war. What the hell are we waiting for? I’m making drinks.”

“Ooh, I’ll help,” said Rita. “Mistah Jet, you wanna pick a stream?”

Jet nodded solemnly. “It would be an honor.”

Juno swatted at Jet’s arm. “It’s just a stream, jeez,” he said. He leaned against Peter and rested his head against Peter’s steady heartbeat. Peter wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

“Rita, get Nureyev something to drink,” Juno yelled. “He’s trapped. I’m not moving.”

“Oh, dear,” sighed Peter, but he clutched Juno closer as the others returned.

They spent the day marathoning streams. Juno dozed through them all, missing large chunks of each until he had no idea what time it was or what was going on. At one point, he woke up with a start, heart racing, and forgot that Peter had been saved until he looked up to see Peter sleeping, his mouth open, a line of drool tracing down his chin. Juno laughed, wiped it away, and settled back into his side to fall asleep again.

When the streams had ended, Rita shoved them all into the kitchen for dinner, and Juno made sure Peter ate two whole helpings of stew, and then they went to sleep, tangled in each other once again, and the days continued like that, their little family finally complete once more.

And for once, everything was okay.

[image]

Chapter End Notes

Art by noir-martian (on Tumblr) aka @random_jocelyn (on twitter)

Beta'd by looking-for-destroya (bigmcworm on ao3)

Find me on tumblr as hundred-separate-lines

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

That night, as Juno and Peter lay in bed, Juno laughed. “It’s really all changing, huh?”

Peter kissed him. “Of course,” he said. “Life is change, Juno.”

“It’s hard.”

“Well, yes,” said Peter, “but would you have it any other way?”

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for coming on this journey! It’s really been such a treat creating this fic, and I hope you enjoy this final installment.

One last big shoutout to noir-martian (on Tumblr) aka @random_jocelyn (on twitter) who created the incredible art for this fic. It has been such a pleasure working with her, and I’m so excited to share this last piece with all of you!

Another big shoutout to looking-for-destroya (bigmcworm on ao3), without whom this never would have happened. Seven months ago, we were sitting on the floor moving post it notes around to start developing the plot, and now this is the first longfic I’ve ever completed. I couldn’t have done it without them!

And finally, thanks to you for sticking with us! If you haven’t already (or if you have), please consider leaving kudos and a comment, or bookmarking this fic if you really loved it! It really helps me out, and it lets me know if people want to see more fics set in this verse!

Enjoy the last bit of fluff!

The next few months passed in a blur of activity that Juno barely bothered to follow.

The New Kinshasan government was gone, and their military surrendered a few short weeks later. The people of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva celebrated in the streets for a week after the official surrender, tearing down the last of the cameras that were so central to

the Guardian Angel System. Peter, Buddy, and Ruslan filmed a short video congratulating the people of the Enuma system on their victory and announcing elections for an interim government that would oversee the transition to a democratic system.

Mick and Alessandra ran for the presidencies of Vishnu and Brahma, respectively, and a native of Shiva ran for president there. Ruslan, meanwhile, campaigned to transition the entire system to a new economic system, one that would redistribute the wealth of New Kinshasan elites and provide free housing, medical care, and food to everyone in the system. Mick visited the crew of the *Carte Blanche* with his new wife, Nova, and her new husband, Cecil, and Juno managed to avoid their baking monstrosities but was trapped into an hour-long conversation on their latest invention, low heels. Juno laughed as Peter tried on the prototype and hobbled around on his heels, grimacing in pain. Peter threw one at his head.

About two months after the end of the revolution, Buddy gathered the Aurinko crime family in the kitchen for an announcement. “Vespa and I are retiring,” she said, when they had all settled in their seats. “We’ve decided to leave the *Carte Blanche* to Rita and Jet, and we will split the rest of our assets amongst the family. We’ll be moving to a small apartment on Vishnu, so we won’t need most of it. We believe we’ve done what we can to help the galaxy, and frankly, darlings, I think we deserve a rest.”

Peter glanced at Juno, and Juno nodded. Peter cleared his throat and looked around to the others.

“I suppose this is a good time to announce that Juno and I have found a home on Brahma, and that we’ll be moving there at the end of the month. You’re all welcome to stay whenever you’re around.”

Rita took one look at all of them and burst into tears.

It took the better part of an hour to calm her down, and Juno shed a few tears as well, although he would later refuse to admit it. Eventually, it was decided that Rita and Jet would continue living a life of crime and potentially recruit some new members to the Aurinko crime family, which would keep its name out of respect to Buddy and Vespa’s work.

That night, as Juno and Peter lay in bed, Juno laughed. “It’s really all changing, huh?”

Peter kissed him. “Of course,” he said. “Life is change, Juno.”

“It’s hard.”

“Well, yes,” said Peter, “but would you have it any other way?”

They moved into the house in the Brahman countryside, and it was lovely. Peter started a garden in front of the house full of roses and dahlias, and Juno planned a vegetable garden for the back, though it would have to wait until after the twins had arrived. There were plenty of rooms for the others to use, when they wanted to, and it was a short drive to the nearest town, to which Peter and Juno traveled occasionally to visit museums and concert halls. They planned vacations for after the twins were born, and they settled into a comfortable new life.

When it was time for the twins to be born, Buddy, Vespa, Rita, and Jet visited. Vespa and Peter stayed with Juno the whole time while the others waited downstairs, watching Rita’s new favorite stream. It was over sooner than they had expected, and soon enough Vespa was calling the rest of them up to meet the newest members of their family.

They opened the door to see Juno laying in bed, holding his first child, and Peter sitting beside him, holding the other. When they arrived, Juno glanced up with a smile.

In his most ostentatious voice, Peter said, “Allow me to introduce you to Benzaiten and Magnus Steel.”

“Ben and Mag,” Juno said, nodding to each in turn. “You can come hold them, if you want.”

They each passed the babies around, Rita cooing and awwing and Jet holding them with a ridiculous amount of caution. After everyone had held each twin, Vespa shooed them all out of the room, grumbling that “Steel needs to rest, damn it.” She left the two of them alone after one final check-up and said good night.

And now the house is settling down. You can hear the wood creaking, traveler, as Rita makes her gentle way down the stairs. She passes Jet in the kitchen, who is carefully ladelling steaming hot chocolate into two mugs, each patterned with a sprig of flowers (which you may recognize, dear traveler, as dahlias and roses). In the room down the hall, Buddy and Vespa are slipping under the soft covers of the guest bed, their fingers brushing together as Buddy arranges them, as warm and secure here as they would be in their own home. They tangle their fingers together between them as they close their eyes,

comfortable in the knowledge that they are safe here. Above, Peter Steel is putting Mag in his crib, brushing his fingers along his soft newborn fuzz, and laying a gentle kiss to his brow. Beside him lies Benzaiten, already fast asleep, his chubby fingers clutching at an old, worn blanket. Mag clutches the blanket, too, and then Ben's arm, his grip surprisingly strong. Peter smiles and looks to Juno, who smiles sleepily at him from their bed, beaming with all the pride and exhaustion of a new parent.

Outside, insects chirp and fly and buzz, filling the cool night air with sound. You may not recognize them, traveler — where you're from, they've not yet evolved, you see — but they're beautiful, all kinds of reds and blues and greens, some bedding down for the night and others just waking. The honeybee is, as you may know, no longer among them, but if you watch quietly, closely, carefully — aha! Yes, dear traveler, I am happy to report that the firefly's humble beauty has not yet been lost. Someday, yes, all things must end, but this one has persisted.

Good night traveler, and enjoy the journey home. We hope to see you again someday on the *Penumbra*.

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